

Cambridge University Press

052102188X - Charity and Bienfaisance: The Treatment of the Poor in the Montpellier Region

1740-1815

Colin Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Charity and 'bienfaisance' in the Enlightenment

Bienfaisance (Morale), C'est une vertu qui nous porte à faire du bien à notre prochain. Elle est la fille de la bienveillance et de l'amour de l'humanité.¹

Over the past few decades, studies by both French and Anglo-Saxon scholars have completely revised our understanding of the nature of Ancien Régime society.² One of the products of this historiographical overhaul has been to uncover a serious and endemic problem of poverty in late eighteenth-century France.³ The roots of this problem lay in the gap between population growth and economic expansion, the former consistently and even increasingly outpacing the latter in a pattern familiar to many developing economies. Contemporaries seem to have been only dimly aware of many of the changes through which they were living,⁴ but all deplored the consequences: social disharmony, nascent political unrest and, especially in comparison with neighbouring England, economic backwardness. There was general agreement too that existing levels of poor relief were insufficient to cope with the scale of the problem. Many Catholic luminaries saw the answer to this in the more thorough-going application of the time-tested virtue of almsgiving which, in the absence of a compulsory poor-rate such as was levied in England, for example, at parished level, still comprised the basis of all assistance. Enlightenment thinkers, however, reflecting the period's modish anti-clericalism, criticised such ready-made answers to a problem which seemed to be getting increasingly out of hand. Firmly rejecting the religious premise that

1 *Supplément à l'Encyclopédie*. i, Amsterdam, 1776, 888.

2 Excellent syntheses are to be found in P. Goubert, *The Ancien Régime. French Society 1600–1750*, English translation, London, 1973; F. Braudel and C.E. Labrousse (eds.), *Histoire économique et sociale de la France*. II. 1660–1789, Paris, 1970; and G. Duby and H. Wallon (eds.), *Histoire de la France rurale*. II. *L'âge classique des paysans, 1340–1789*, Paris, 1975.

3 O. Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France, 1750–1789*, Oxford, 1974, provides an admirable description of this problem of poverty.

4 It was long held, for example, that population was actually declining rather than growing. M. Reinhard, A. Armengaud and J. Dupâquier, *Histoire générale de la population mondiale*, Paris, 1968, 242.

Cambridge University Press

052102188X - Charity and Bienfaisance: The Treatment of the Poor in the Montpellier Region

1740-1815

Colin Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

poverty was an inevitable consequence of man's imperfection, they groped unsurely towards an appreciation of the societal origins of poverty and, vaunting the provision of employment as the harbinger of social cohesion and economic regeneration, sought remedies in constructive political and administrative action. Eighteenth-century reflection on the nature of poverty was thus conducted in the shadow of a raging polemic involving on one side traditional charity and on the other a more secular and optimistic system of values to which Enlightenment thinkers attached the term *bienfaisance*.⁵

As with so many key Enlightenment concepts, the term *bienfaisance*, coined in the early eighteenth century by the Abbé de Saint-Pierre and popularised by Voltaire,⁶ belied its somewhat anodine formal definition by being in practice a *machine de guerre* against established religious values. *Philosophes* expatiating on the supposedly universal propensity to *bienfaisance* in the face of human suffering gleefully highlighted the sectarian and denominational character of Christian charity. The latter, it was further argued, was more geared to the spiritual than to the material well-being of the poor. It also adjudged the terrestrial fate of the recipient as of lesser account than the salvation of the giver: almsgiving was a method of easing the charitable donor's soul through the after life and the recipient was merely an incidental means to a more lofty end.

In the Enlightenment critique, therefore, charity could be berated as an egotistical, even ungenerous act.⁷ The same was felt to apply to charitable foundations. In his famous article 'Fondation' in the *Encyclopédie*, for example, Turgot denounced the 'vanité frivole' of individuals who made religious and charitable foundations. 'L'utilité publique', he fulminated,

est la loi suprême et ne doit pas être balancée ni par un respect superstitieux pour ce qu'on appelle *l'intention des fondateurs*, comme si des particuliers ignorans et bornés avoient eu le droit d'enchaîner à leurs volontés capricieuses les générations qui n'étoient point encore; ni par la crainte de blesser les droits prétendus de certains corps, comme si les corps particuliers avoient quelques droits vis-à-vis l'état.⁸

This citation also captures another of the charges which Enlightenment thinkers made against traditional charity: that it was an occasional virtue, whose incidence and effect on need varied according to the availability and goodwill of donors. *Bienfaisance*, on the other hand, was a rational and methodical activity which sought an appropriate response to suffering as circumstances required, and exuded a reassuring pragmatism. This was

⁵ See definition at the beginning of the Introduction.

⁶ F. Brunot, *Histoire de la langue française des origines à 1900*, vi, première partie, Paris, 1930, 113.

⁷ Cf. the clearly anti-clerical connotations of remarks under the *Encyclopédie's* entry on 'Bienfaiteur': 'celui qui fait du bien pour en tirer profit ne mérite point d'être appelé un *bienfaiteur*; son action est un commerce et un trafic'.

⁸ *Encyclopédie*, vii, 1757, 75.

Cambridge University Press

052102188X - Charity and Bienfaisance: The Treatment of the Poor in the Montpellier Region

1740-1815

Colin Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Charity and 'bienfaisance' in the Enlightenment*

3

thought to contrast with the charity embodied in foundations for, as Turgot had maintained,

La société n'a pas toujours les mêmes besoins; la nature et la distribution des propriétés, la division entre les différens ordres du peuple, les opinions, les mœurs, les occupations générales de la nation ou de ses différens portions, le climat même, les maladies et les autres accidens de la vie humaine éprouvent une variation continuelle: de nouveaux besoins naissent, d'autres cessent de se faire sentir.⁹

The inflexible and donor-orientated nature of charitable foundations thus made them unresponsive to changing social circumstances – a weighty charge in a period of rapid social transformation like the late eighteenth century. In particular, it was argued, charity was not attuned to discriminating between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' cases of poverty. The handouts established by foundation outside monastery gates, to take an example much cited in the literature, benefited the vagrant and idle good-for-nothing as much as the aged widow and incapacitated pauper. There was, moreover, a geographical as well as a sociological dimension to the notion of the 'deserving' poor. Regions in visible need of assistance – many remote country areas, for example – lacked proper relief provision, while more affluent localities enjoyed a plethora of charities. Turgot was not alone in claiming that the effect of a superabundance of relief was to 'rendre la condition du fainéant préférable à celle de l'homme qui travaille'.¹⁰ Instead of palliating, it merely aggravated the problem of poverty by licensing improvidence and sloth and discouraging enterprise. And from the avoidance or evasion of work to a life of vice and crime was felt to be only a short step.

The stern and unbending work ethic preached by the proponents of Enlightenment *bienfaisance* fuelled a host of diatribes against existing poor-relief institutions, not least against the so-called hôpitaux généraux. The hôpital général was France's paradigmatic poor-relief institution. Other types of hospital – the hôtels-Dieu located in the main cities for the reception of the sick, for example, or the small country hospitals which acted as catch-all institutions for most local varieties of distress – to a certain extent only fitted within the interstices of the nation-wide network of hôpitaux généraux which had been established in the second half of the seventeenth century under the dual influence of the royal government's concern to contain the social threat which the poor comprised, and of the post-Tridentine church's renewed involvement in poor-relief provision.¹¹ Within the forbidding hôpitaux généraux, the differing elements within

⁹ Ibid., 74. ¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See in particular E. Chill, 'Religion and mendicity in seventeenth-century France', *J.R.S.H.*, 1962; M. Foucault, *Folie et déraison. Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Paris, 1961, 54ff.; and C. Paultre, *De la répression de la mendicité et du vagabondage en France sous l'Ancien Régime*, Paris, 1906, 137ff.

Cambridge University Press

052102188X - Charity and Bienfaisance: The Treatment of the Poor in the Montpellier Region

1740-1815

Colin Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the worlds of poverty and vice were to be confined, and moralised into sound habits and religious orthodoxy by a combination of enforced labour and piety.

To Enlightenment critics, the rationale behind the hôpitaux généraux seemed a throwback to a bygone age. If nothing else, the discrepancy between theory and practice had proved gapingly wide. The crowding together of the needy and distressed caused acute sanitary problems which dogged every hospital. In practice too, cash shortages had always limited the extent of the so-called *grand renfermement des pauvres*, which was never total. After the first few decades of the eighteenth century, and often before, most hôpitaux généraux admitted only the 'impotent poor' (*invalides*) – the aged, the infirm, the unwanted child, for example – and abandoned their assigned social mission of also institutionalising the able-bodied poor (*valides*) unwilling or unable to work. Furthermore, the hôpitaux were urban institutions, a point which was not lost on the numerous Enlightenment thinkers influenced by Physiocratic views of the importance of a strong agrarian interest. The economic function of the hôpitaux was also called into question. Some critics maintained that the workshops within the hôpitaux distorted market forces and should be shut on these grounds. Others pointed out how rarely the works schemes of the hôpitaux operated at all effectively and maintained that, just as almsgiving encouraged sloth, so the traditional poor-relief arrangements had signally failed to set the poor to work.

Enlightenment *bienfaisance* thus accorded hospitals short shrift. There was, it is true, a current of social thought more kindly disposed towards the hôtels-Dieu. The latter institutions, orientated around the care of the sick poor, should, it was argued, be reformed and reshaped so as to facilitate the clinical study of disease.¹² This was evidently an idea with a great future before it. Yet, in the Ancien Régime, it represented a minority view and did not detract from the general agreement that, for a variety of social and economic reasons, the vast majority of hospitals should be scrapped and more flexible and less religiously orientated schemes of assistance introduced which did not take the poor receiving relief off the labour-market and which were geared around the home of the pauper.

The strength of the arguments adduced by the critics of Catholic charity and its works was considerable and it certainly influenced supporters of the traditional social ethic. Many almsgivers and charitable overseers of the poor appear to have been increasingly aware of the need to discriminate

12 The works of Michel Foucault are particularly illuminating on this aspect of Enlightenment thought. See in particular his *The Birth of the Clinic. An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, English translation, London, 1973; and M. Foucault *et al.*, *Les Machines à guérir (aux origines de l'hôpital moderne)*, Paris, 1979.

Cambridge University Press

052102188X - Charity and Bienfaisance: The Treatment of the Poor in the Montpellier Region

1740-1815

Colin Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Charity and 'bienfaisance' in the Enlightenment*

5

between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor.¹³ There was a similar convergence of views over poor-relief institutions. When in 1777, for example, the Académie of Châlons-sur-Marne held a prize essay competition on 'les moyens de détruire la mendicité en France en rendant les mendiants utiles à l'Etat sans les rendre malheureux', only one out of a host of entries urged a positive role for the hôpitaux.¹⁴ The consensus among entrants to this popular competition was that home relief should be extended at the direct expense of institutionalisation. There was a considerable amount of agreement too – again, among clerical and anti-clerical writers alike – that central government would have to take a leading role in any reform that was attempted.

The existence of such a strong consensus of opinion is perhaps not as surprising as might initially appear. It has long been established, for example, that there was a considerable amount of common ground in the world views of Catholics and 'unbelievers' in the eighteenth century.¹⁵ In addition, recent research on the sociology of the Enlightenment has emphasised the strong participation of clerics in many quintessentially 'enlightened' activities.¹⁶

There is a strong case for arguing that the critics of voluntary charity were also influenced, partly at least, by the actual performance of poor-relief institutions over the course of the eighteenth century – that beyond polemic and hyperbole lay a groundswell of unaffected common sense. This point needs emphasis since the Enlightenment critique has sometimes been viewed as an elitist infatuation with ratiocination in a mental vacuum sealed tight against empirical reality. The roots of such a view lie in the polemics against a rational and methodical approach to the problem of poverty in the Enlightenment itself. The view was considerably strengthened following the failure of the Revolutionary assemblies in the 1790s to recast the nation's poor laws in accordance with ideas current in the Enlightenment. Historiographically, it won a measure of acceptance in the acrimonious and anti-clerical debates which accompanied the extension of state involvement in assistance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In order to denigrate the supposedly baneful influence of the state on everything related to poor relief, the ultra-reactionary Catholic writer Léon Lallemand, for example, devoted much of his life to cataloguing the

13 O. Hufton, 'Towards an understanding of the poor of eighteenth-century France', in J.F. Boshier (ed.), *French Government and Society, 1500–1850. Essays in Memory of Alfred Cobban*, London, 1973, 164 and *passim*.

14 Summary of entries in Abbé Malvaux, *Les Moyens de détruire la mendicité en France en rendant les mendiants utiles à l'Etat sans les rendre malheureux*, Châlons-sur-Marne, 1780.

15 R.R. Palmer, *Catholics and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France*, Princeton, New Jersey, 1939.

16 See especially D. Roche, *Le Siècle des lumières en province. Académies et académiciens provinciaux, 1680–1789*, 2 vols., Paris, 1978.

Cambridge University Press

052102188X - Charity and Bienfaisance: The Treatment of the Poor in the Montpellier Region

1740-1815

Colin Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

glories of voluntary charity and decrying the hardships visited on the poor by central government's legislative experimentation during the Revolution. The *bienfaisance* of the Enlightenment thus came to be tarred with the Revolutionary brush. And although it had long been a commonplace of Revolutionary historiography that the very poor had suffered in the Revolutionary decade, Lallemand's insistence that the cause of misery was over-attachment to the supposedly utopian theorising of the Enlightenment encouraged a rather disparaging view of the practicality and seriousness of *bienfaisance* even among historians far better aware than Lallemand had been of the shortcomings of private charity.¹⁷

A fresh and more dispassionate examination of a problem whose historiography still bears the scars of the anti-clerical disputes of the Third Republic is therefore long overdue.¹⁸ History as well as politics has evolved since then, and the debate over the rival claims of charity and *bienfaisance* in the Enlightenment and Revolutionary period can be reviewed using historical methods and approaches largely beyond the Lallemand generation of scholars. The latter's impressionistic approach, for example, though often based on an admirably wide variety of sources, easily lent itself to partisan judgements based on a selection of available facts. Obviously, there is still an important place for historical impressionism in a topic as wide-ranging as this. Nevertheless, there are many crucial areas germane to the main debate in which a more rigorous approach, using quantitative techniques where possible, will pay dividends – as indeed has already proved the case in the recent revision of analysis of the nature and patterns of eighteenth-century poverty. The cautious use of quantification in the use of records of agencies of poor relief, for example, allows more firmly based conclusions to be drawn on central points of earlier contention such as the performance of poor-relief institutions and the implementation of various poor-relief measures. Similarly, the systematic and methodical use of the preambles of wills allows the pattern and evolution of charitable giving to be gauged over the long term, thus permitting the historian to penetrate to underlying *mentalités* concerning the poor and their relief. Such materials complement and nuance the largely literary sources on which earlier historians based their analyses of charitable opinion. To take a further example, the recent growth of interest in history 'from below' encourages a closer look to be taken at popular attitudes towards poor relief. The

17 See, for example, the acerbic comments of Olwen Hufton on the Enlightenment approach to the problem of poverty in her contribution to A. Cobban (ed.), *The Eighteenth Century*, London 1969, 306.

18 Even a work as seemingly detached and serene as Camille Bloch's master work, *L'Assistance et l'Etat en France à la veille de la Révolution*, Paris, 1908, which is by far the most impressive intellectual monument to this generation of scholars of poor relief, is not without its ritualistic anti-clerical sniping.

Cambridge University Press

052102188X - Charity and Bienfaisance: The Treatment of the Poor in the Montpellier Region

1740-1815

Colin Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Charity and 'bienfaisance' in the Enlightenment*

7

Lallemand school and its opponents were united in assuming that recipients of relief could only adopt an attitude of humble gratitude to their social superiors. In fact, this is a point which needs substantial revision.

The writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries worked on a massive canvas, usually embracing the whole of France in their analyses. To examine the 'charitable tissue' of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century France in the way envisaged here, however, calls for microscopic analysis. This, consequently, is a regional study. The Montpellier area recommends itself on a number of practical counts. First, many of its poor-relief institutions have retained copious archives. Second, the region contains a wide variety of different types of terrain and local economy, ranging from the fertile Bas Languedoc plain to mountain fastnesses on the fringes of the Massif Central: the contentions of Enlightenment social theorists on the geographical unevenness of charitable resources are thus particularly relevant here. Third, there is a high degree of correlation between pre- and post-Revolutionary boundaries which facilitates comparisons over time: the department of the Hérault which was created in 1790 followed very closely the outline of a clump of five Ancien Régime dioceses – those of Agde, Béziers, Lodève, Montpellier and Saint-Pons – which form the area under study.¹⁹ The fourth relevant point is that the region comprised one of the best-endowed and most charitable areas in the whole of France – and one therefore in which the Enlightenment critique of charity may be fairly rigorously tested. Finally, the area was also the home of what was throughout the period the premier medical city of provincial France, and one therefore in which relations between poor-relief institutions and the medical profession on the eve of the so-called 'medical revolution' seem particularly interesting.

Within the narrow geographical framework of the present study, charity and *bienfaisance* are examined in the *longue durée*. In an analysis of long-term changes in social policy and *mentalités*, it seemed erroneous to call a halt, as is often done in studies of poor relief, in 1789, 1795, 1797 or some other rather arbitrary midway point. The period covered therefore ranges from the last half-century of the Ancien Régime through to the end of the Napoleonic era, when changes adumbrated at the height of the Enlightenment and Revolutionary decade had largely worked themselves out.

Within the general course of development here outlined, the events of the 1790s inevitably stand out. The Revolution, after all, presented a generation of politicians and social theorists with a golden opportunity of bringing into existence a comprehensive and humane social programme grounded in the values of *bienfaisance* which they had been ingesting in the

19 For boundaries, see the handy guide of E. Appolis, *Manuel des études héraultaises*, Valence, 1943.

Cambridge University Press

052102188X - Charity and Bienfaisance: The Treatment of the Poor in the Montpellier Region

1740-1815

Colin Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

decades prior to 1789. In the event, their hopes and ambitions were not fulfilled – any more than they were in educational policy, which was another sphere in which the Revolutionaries were accorded the chance of putting Enlightenment ideas into practice.²⁰ The failure of the men of the 1790s to create the kind of ‘welfare state’ which was, as we shall see, the ideal of the Constituent Assembly’s Comité de Mendicité in 1790 and 1791, was not total: in spite of the revival of traditional charity in the late 1790s and the declining stock of *bienfaisance*, there were a number of ways in which state involvement in poor relief was increased by the Revolutionary experience. Nevertheless, despite the bright start to the decade, the 1790s were to witness the withering of Enlightenment ideals under the influence of social, economic and political turbulence, and the definitive shelving of plans to recast the nation’s poor laws.

The basic premise of the present study is that the full meaning of concepts like charity and *bienfaisance* in this key period in the history of French poor relief can best be drawn out not by the elucidation of the texts of social theorists and commentators, but rather by a close examination of how they fitted into a wide range of differing and often only slowly evolving social practices and attitudes. In spite of the study’s restricted geographical framework, I hope to illuminate the wider context of Enlightenment and Revolutionary social thinking and the long-term significance and effects of the Revolution on French social development.

20 For convenient summaries of both the educational and philanthropic legacies of the Revolutionary era, see in particular J. Godechot, *Les Institutions de la France sous la Révolution et l’Empire*, Paris, 1968.

Cambridge University Press

052102188X - Charity and Bienfaisance: The Treatment of the Poor in the Montpellier Region

1740-1815

Colin Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I



The setting

Cambridge University Press

052102188X - Charity and Bienfaisance: The Treatment of the Poor in the Montpellier Region

1740-1815

Colin Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

Montpellier and its region

Entering eighteenth-century Montpellier was an education in the social, economic and cultural contrasts of Bas Languedoc and in the city's pre-eminence in the region. If, like most travellers, one approached the city along the post-roads of the coastal plain it was easy to be impressed by the appearances of prosperity. Most communities observed the time-honoured precepts of Mediterranean mixed farming: the lion's share of cultivable land was devoted to cereals with vines, olives, fruit trees, vegetables and mulberries as secondary crops; while arable farming was complemented by the upkeep of flocks of sheep and goats which were to be found in particularly large numbers in those communities which spread into the *garrigues*, the low and scrub-covered limestone hills bordering the alluvial deposits of the littoral.¹ The landscape in places formed, in the words of Arthur Young, the celebrated English agronomist who visited the region in the 'animated and joyous' harvest-time atmosphere of the summer of 1787, 'a beautiful mixture' of its different elements.² Young was also struck by the high quality of the network of communications: the much praised Canal du Midi which linked the Atlantic with the Mediterranean at Agde, and the fine roads – 'stupendous works' – constructed on the orders of the provincial Estates.³ There were numerous villas and country houses to admire too, 'well-built, clean and comfortable . . . spread thickly through the countryside', testimony to the wealth of regional elites and the importance of urban capital in the transformation of the countryside.⁴ Away to the

1 Valuable contemporary accounts of the economy of Bas Languedoc in the eighteenth century include C.S. Bernard de Ballainvilliers, 'Mémoires sur le Languedoc, divisés par diocèses et sub-délégations', manuscript, 1788, B.M. Montpellier (henceforth cited as *Ball.*); and de Genssane, *Histoire naturelle de la province de Languedoc. Partie minéralogique et géoponique*, 5 vols., Montpellier, 1776–9. The best secondary accounts are E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Les Paysans de Languedoc*, 2 vols., Paris, 1966; L. Dutil, *L'Etat économique du Languedoc à la fin de l'Ancien Régime (1750–1789)*, Paris, 1911; and R. Dugrand, *Villes et campagnes en Bas Languedoc. Le réseau urbain du Bas Languedoc méditerranéen*, Paris, 1963.

2 A. Young, *Travels in France during the Years 1787, 1788 and 1789*, edited by C. Maxwell, Cambridge, 1929, 40, 42.

3 *Ibid.*, 39f. Admiring comment on the roads and canals of Languedoc was a banality of eighteenth-century travel literature.

4 *Ibid.*, 43.