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978-0-521-18885-2 - Poor Relief and Welfare in Germany from the Reformation to World War I

Larry Frohman

Excerpt

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Introduction

Poor relief and charity have often struggled to find their historiographical voice. On the one hand, their history has often been written, especially by their practitioners and advocates, either as an expression of Christian brotherly love or as a manifestation of a primal form of human interaction.¹ On the other hand, the triumph of social insurance has given the modern social state a powerful telos that privileges the rise of state-centered social insurance and social policy programs while marginalizing all those earlier institutions and strategies for assisting the needy that cannot be incorporated into the narrative prehistory of these programs, their subsequent development, or the specific vision of modernity implicit in them. However, since the 1990s those forms of assistance to the needy that were repressed in earlier narratives of the social state have returned with a vengeance from the periphery to the center of scholarly interest, and with the rise of the new social history – and, more recently, the cultural turn – this historical backwater has become a privileged site of inquiry for historians and social theorists interested in social discipline, gender, civil society, modernity, and state-formation.

The master concept in the recent literature on poor relief, charity, and welfare has been social discipline, and any study of the topic has to come to terms with this body of work.² Much of this literature regarded poor relief, charity, and welfare as mechanisms for marginalizing the poor and deviant and excluding them from the community, and it correspondingly stressed the disciplinary, repressive, and potentially totalitarian character of these programs. This book intervenes in this debate – whose German variant has been more directly influenced by Gerhard Oestreich and Detlev Peukert than by Michel Foucault – in a

¹ For this latter characterization, see Hans Scherpner, *Theorie der Fürsorge* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 122.

² These comments are only meant to give the reader an overview of the book, and the relevant literature will be addressed in the individual chapters.

number of specific contexts ranging from the early workhouses to nineteenth-century voluntary associations to turn-of-the-century preventive social welfare. My thesis here is that the social discipline paradigm is not so much wrong as one sided. One of the great strengths of the social discipline paradigm has been its ability to capture the logical connections between the discursive constitution of need, surveillance of the needy and endangered, measures to discipline and otherwise influence the behavior of this population, and the formation of their subjectivity. However, the stronger versions of the social discipline paradigm have been prone to take the explication of this logic of social discipline for a description of the reality of assistance practice and to conclude that this process precludes the possibility that social intervention could have strengthened the bonds of community or genuinely enhanced the rights and welfare of the needy.

It seems, though, that the interpretive pendulum is beginning to swing in a different direction, questioning both the equation of assistance with discipline, marginalization, and exclusion and the theory of modernity implicit in this work.³ The social discipline literature has been based on the assumption that the essential features of poor relief and charity can best be understood by studying attitudes and policies toward idlers and vagrants, and it has portrayed social assistance primarily as a mechanism for the production and exclusion of social marginality. However, those who read the history of social assistance exclusively from the margins inward have often failed to recognize that the local, deserving poor were treated with much greater solicitude than were vagrants and the foreign poor, and any interpretation that fails to understand that assistance to the poor is as much about social integration, community, and citizenship as about social disciplining, marginalization, and exclusion is fundamentally flawed.

In his work, Oestreich viewed social disciplining as one key dimension of the larger process of state formation.⁴ According to Oestreich, the early modern

³ Lynn Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers. The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700–1948* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), and Robert Castel, *From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers. Transformation of the Social Question*, trans. Richard Boyd (Transaction Publishers, 2003). For Germany, see Adelheid von Saldern, “Integration und Fragmentierung in europäischen Städten,” *AfS* 42 (2006), 3–60, especially 28, 34. Saldern recognizes the integrative function of poor relief without losing sight of the fact that the social discrimination and political disenfranchisement entailed by its receipt fragmented the community and marginalized its recipients. I myself have explored these issues in “Prevention, Welfare and Citizenship: The War on Tuberculosis and Infant Mortality in Germany, 1900–1930,” *CEH* 39:3 (September 2006), 431–81.

⁴ Gerhard Oestreich, “Strukturprobleme des europäischen Absolutismus,” in *Geist und Gestalt des frühmodernen Staates* (Berlin, 1969), 179–97. See also Winfried Schulze, “Gerhard Oestreichs Begriff ‘Sozialdisziplinierung in der frühen Neuzeit,’” *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 14 (1987), 265–302; Stefan Breuer, “Sozialdisziplinierung. Probleme und Problemverlagerung eines Konzepts bei Max Weber, Gerhard Oestreich und Michel Foucault,” in Christoph Sachße and Florian Tennstedt, eds., *Soziale Sicherheit und soziale Disziplinierung* (Suhrkamp, 1986), 45–69; Robert Jütte, “Disziplinierungsmechanismen in der städtischen Armenfürsorge der Frühneuzeit,” in Sachße and Tennstedt, eds., *Soziale Sicherheit*, 101–18; and Norbert Finzsch, “Elias, Foucault, Oestreich. On a Historical Theory of Confinement,” in Finzsch and Jütte, eds., *Institutions of Confinement* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3–16.

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state constituted itself by gathering up the authority that had heretofore been dispersed among the diverse intermediate authorities that had governed social life since the later Middle Ages and then asserting its own internal sovereign authority in the form of police ordinances that laid down more rational, uniform codes regulating virtually every aspect of the social, economic, and religious life of the population, including poor relief. In contrast to Foucault, who depicted social discipline as a universal, anonymous process, for Oestreich agency is clearly located in municipal authorities, territorial rulers, and their bureaucracies.⁵ Recent scholarship, however, has emphasized the intrinsic limits of state-sponsored social disciplining and criticized earlier writing on poor relief and social discipline for mistaking normative pronouncements for an accurate description of reality while overlooking both the real limitations on magisterial power and, in many instances, the lack of interest on the part of the magistrates in carrying out this disciplinary project. Moreover, the explanatory power of state-sponsored social disciplining is limited by the fact that neighborhood self-help, which cannot be recuperated by any theory of social discipline, always represented an important source of assistance to the needy.⁶

These criticisms of top-down social disciplining have in recent years begun to come together in the concept of social control, which has been used to describe the ongoing efforts by religious congregations, guilds, neighborhoods, and the broader community to enforce social norms. Social control thus represents an attempt to move beyond the critique of a statist model of social disciplining to a positive conceptualization of societal or communal self-regulation as the driving force behind state formation in early modern Europe.⁷ Although the idea of social control does not escape from the basic question of how to conceptualize the efforts of the community to alter the values, comportment, and sense of self of those individuals who transgress against its norms, it does evince a much more direct concern for the preservation of community than does the

⁵ Other writers on early modern poor relief, such as Sachße and Tennstedt, *Geschichte der Armenfürsorge*, I:38, have suggested that the disciplining process should be related more directly to the rise of capitalism than to that of the absolutist state.

⁶ See the exchange between Robert Jütte, “‘Disziplin zu predigen ist eine Sache, sich ihr zu unterwerfen eine andere’ (Cervantes). Prolegomena zu einer sozialgeschichte der Armenfürsorge diesseits und jenseits des Fortschritts,” *GuG* 17 (1991), 92–101, and Martin Dinges, “Frühneuzeitliche Armenfürsorge als Sozialdisziplinierung? Probleme mit einem Konzept,” *GuG* 17 (1992), 5–29.

⁷ It is important to note that this new concept of social control is quite different from that laid out by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor. The Functions of Public Welfare* (Pantheon, 1971). The development of this new incarnation of the concept can be followed in Herman Roodenburg and Pieter Spierenburg, eds., *Social Control in Europe, 1500–1800*, vol. 1 (Ohio State University Press, 2004); Heinz Schilling, ed., *Institutions, Instruments and Agents of Social Control and Discipline in Early Modern Europe* (Vittorio Klostermann, 1999); Schilling, “Disziplinierung oder ‘Selbstregulierung der Untertanen’? Ein Plädoyer für die Doppelperspektive von Makro- und Mikrohistoire bei der Erforschung der frühmodernen Kirchenzucht,” *HZ* 264 (1997), 675–91; and Heinrich Richard Schmidt, “Sozialdisziplinierung? Ein Plädoyer für das Ende des Etatismus in der Kofessionalisierungsforschung,” *HZ* 265 (1997), 639–82.

social discipline paradigm, and this insight offers a way to assess the usefulness of social discipline for writing the history of poor relief.

One way of approaching the question of the limits of social discipline is to ask how poor people came to be recognized as deserving of assistance. While the propertied often viewed charity as a means of displaying their munificence and thereby reaffirming their social status, the poor themselves also had distinct notions of justice and their own ideas about who was deserving of what kinds of assistance under what circumstances, and in their petitions for assistance the poor had to narrate their misfortunes in ways that, without violating their own plebeian notions of justice, would affirm their honor and merit. Petitioning for assistance was part of a process in which the propertied and the poor continuously renegotiated the terms of membership in the community, the notions of honor and morality on which this community rested, the social hierarchies through which it was structured, and the rights – in this case, the right to assistance – associated therewith.⁸ Social integration and social exclusion were two sides of the same coin, as were assistance and discipline, and it was through the novel and distinctly modern distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor that the borders of the community were drawn. For the poor, the most tangible symbol of membership in the community was the recognition that they displayed the qualities that rendered them deserving of communal assistance, and building community meant as much insuring that the legitimate needs of the weaker members were met as it did correcting the wayward or excluding the incorrigible.⁹

The goal here is less to jettison the social discipline paradigm than to grasp its limits and understand the mutual implication of assistance and discipline, integration and exclusion, and correction and chastisement in the various forms of social assistance developed from the early 1500s through World War I. The diverse institutions established to assist the needy all represent elements of a broader socio-corrective complex that sought alternately to provide for the deserving poor, correct the penitent, and chastise those wayward individuals whose deviant behavior (especially with regard to work, family life, and sexual morality) was regarded as the cause of their distress, all in the name of social integration. Punishment and exclusion were only invoked as an ultima ratio to protect society from those reprobates who were chronically resistant to such socialization, and the resort to such measures reflected the failure of these programs, rather than their *raison d'être*. Public assistance, however, was always intrinsically paternalist, and paternalistic solicitude could assume many

⁸ Martin Dinges, “Aushandeln von Armut in der frühen Neuzeit: Selbsthilfepotential, Bürgervorstellungen und Verwaltungslogiken,” *Werkstatt Geschichte* 10 (1995), 7–15, and Steve Hindle, *On the Parish? The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England c. 1550–1750* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁹ Katherine A. Lynch, *Individuals, Families, and Communities in Europe, 1200–1800* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), and Joel Harrington, “Escape from the Great Confinement: The Genealogy of a German Workhouse,” *JMH* 71 (June 1999), 308–45.

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different forms – including chastisement when it was believed to be in the best interest of the individual. Assistance was genuine, but always conditional on proper behavior, and the threat of harsher measures was always implicit in the offer of such support. The problem, though, is that it is impossible to deduce in advance how the balance between assistance and discipline, and between the rights of the individual and those of the community, would be struck in any specific case, and the book provides a historical account of the successive attempts to square this theoretical circle from the Reformation to World War I.

Poor relief and charity are historically mutable phenomena whose history is coextensive with that of the modern world, and in Chapter 1 I argue that the origins of recognizably modern forms of assistance to the poor are to be found in the desacralization of poverty and almsgiving at the end of the Middle Ages and in the emergence of poverty as the object of state social policy in conjunction with a great wave of reforms in the first half of the sixteenth century. The questions are to what extent were these reforms the product of socioeconomic change or religious reform, in what ways did the reorganization of poor relief differ in Lutheran, Calvinist, and Catholic territories, and why? The second chapter asks how the house of correction, or the workhouse, as it came to be known, emerged as the basic mechanism for responding to the diverse manifestations of the social problem as it was understood in the age of absolutism. As its name implies, the house of correction was originally a mechanism for reintegrating into the community wayward children and others who transgressed against communal values. However, between 1650 and 1750 it was transformed into a deeply repressive institution that became the cornerstone of the absolutist war on vagrancy before itself entering into a terminal crisis in the second half of the eighteenth century. This crisis was emblematic of a broader crisis of early modern forms of paternalistic social governance, and the failure of this project created a discursive space for a new liberal approach that was to dominate public perception of the social problem until the end of the nineteenth century.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 show how the evolution of poor relief and charity across the nineteenth century both mirrored and accelerated the formation of the market economy and bourgeois civil society during this period. This new social formation was, however, haunted by the crisis of pauperism with the social problem being defined primarily in terms of cultural deficiencies and the failure of social reproduction, rather than in political or economic terms. The distinguishing feature of the social politics of these decades was the formation of moral reform organizations competing with one another to solve the social problem by socializing the asocial pauper class in accordance with their own cultural norms so as to create the providential, responsible, industrious, and disciplined subjects whose existence was presupposed by contemporary theories of civil society and the market economy. Chapters 4 and 5 shift registers from the social domain to the domain of political economy. Here, efforts to use the poor laws to promote economic development and combat the social consequences (and associated assistance costs) of greater labor mobility gave rise to

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chronic conflicts between the territorial and the local state and between urban industrial regions and the rural areas (primarily in the Prussian East) from which the industrial labor force was recruited. These chapters reconstruct the evolution of the poor laws at the national level from the 1840s through the first decade of the twentieth century and analyze the Elberfeld system, which became the model for deterrent poor relief in imperial Germany and the second key mechanism for producing the self-governing subjects of the bourgeois world.

The primary goal of nineteenth-century poor relief was to combat pauperism, not prevent poverty. Relief officials provided only the barest existence minimum, and, in hopes of deterring all but the truly impotent and deserving poor from relying on the assistance of others, they did so in a discriminatory manner and on a subsidiary basis only after the individual or family had fallen into utter destitution. All these policies were based on the presumption that poverty, crime, and other forms of social deviance were a matter of individual character, and they sought to combat these problems through moral reform and the deterrent promotion of self-reliance. Beginning in the 1880s and 1890s, however, this individualist, voluntaristic understanding of need and the deterrent policies to which it had given rise were challenged by the emergence of a new form of social knowledge: a social perspective on poverty that viewed the individual not as a moral free agent, but as an embodied subject constrained by the materiality of social and environmental forces to act in certain ways. From this new perspective, the solution to the social problem depended less on strengthening individual morality than on environmental and social reforms, along with popular enlightenment regarding such things as advances in hygiene and modern child-raising practices, to provide the needy with the material and cultural resources that they needed to live in accordance with the norms established by the new social and medical sciences. Although the need to secure the economic and military power of the nation provided a compelling rationale for new forms of preventive intervention to enhance the health, productivity, and political loyalty of the population, the political rationality of the new preventive social welfare (*soziale Fürsorge*) was diametrically opposed to that of deterrent relief. The development of the new interventionist strategies associated with preventive social welfare was predicated on a rethinking of the liberal social contract in terms of a complex web of social rights and social obligations whose structure and internal dynamics were theorized by Progressive reformers. These preventive social welfare programs, which represent the second pillar of the German welfare system, were as much an evolution out of traditional poor relief and charity as they were a rejection of its underlying principles. Chapters 7 and 10 reconstruct the development of these new ideas and show how the Progressive rethinking of the liberal social contract on the basis of the social perspective on poverty led to the expansion of preventive social welfare programs designed to secure the rights implicit in their solidaristic conception of social citizenship. This turn from deterrence to prevention represents the conceptual missing link connecting the history of the poor laws to that of the

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welfare state, and this broad development provides the narrative thread for the second half of the book.

Chapter 6 examines the several new players in the welfare reform field during the empire, including bourgeois women, Catholic charities, and Social Democracy, and it shows how the ensuing competition between groups seeking to shape the character of the poor in accordance with their own worldviews altered the nature of citizenship, fragmented the social domain, and shaped the provision of social assistance. The bourgeois women's movement was especially influential in this respect because it was their gendered reform strategy that gave birth to the modern social work profession. Chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10 explore the impact of this paradigm shift from deterrence to prevention and its implications for citizenship, social rights, and the role of the state as they unfolded in the primary fields of social engagement: the family, assistance to the jobless, and youth welfare. These chapters collectively show how the principle of prevention and the subsequent call for the "social evolution" of poor relief (Chapter 10) challenged, though without completely overturning, the political rationality of mid-century liberalism and deterrent poor relief in the years leading up to World War I. But they also raise the question of whether these preventive social welfare programs enhanced the welfare of the needy or simply opened the way to their more intensive disciplining.

The war, however, fundamentally altered the political parameters of social reform, and Chapters 11 and 12 assess its impact on the development of social assistance. While both the national and local states poured massive amounts of money and energy into social programs designed to stabilize the "home" front and the breadwinner family, Chapter 11 shows how these programs unintentionally raised all sorts of unsettling questions about gender roles and women's citizenship. At the same time, the mobilization of the national community for industrialized warfare, the generalization of need, and the blurring of the lines between military and society led the diverse groups of the new poor to make restitutional claims on the state that could not be satisfied through deterrent relief, which was rapidly hollowed out by the expansion of preventive social welfare programs. All these forces, together with the challenges of postwar reconstruction, combined to forge a new sense of national solidarity that endowed preventive social welfare programs with a national, military, and social significance that made it possible to break through the political barriers that had limited their acceptance before the war. The demise of deterrent poor relief, whose development since the 1500s will be traced in this book, and the corresponding breakthrough of preventive social welfare during World War I – that is, the creation of the social welfare state through the social evolution of poor relief and the ensuing "break-up" of the poor laws – make 1918 the logical place to end this story.

Methodologically, this book aspires to go beyond the all-too-numerous organizational and administrative histories of poor relief by showing relief, charity, and welfare to be forms of historically situated social practice, both symbolic and material. The heart of the book is the analysis of the cultural frameworks

and discursive strategies through which the poor came to be constructed as needy, the technologies and practices devised – on the basis of these constructs – to assist, integrate, and discipline these populations, and the political alchemy through which the dominant classes sought to reconcile the interests of the needy with those of the greater community in order to justify their interventions into the lives of the former. Although it is impossible to write a history of assistance to the poor without making some assumptions about underlying demographic, economic, and social “realities,” this is not a book about poverty per se or the mentality and everyday life of the poor. The book ventures into this territory only to the extent that this is necessary to illuminate the changing contemporary understanding of the social question, though it does so in an awareness that these discourses were influenced as much by what escaped them (because it could not be made sense of in the categories employed by these narratives) as by what they encompassed. As a result, the book reveals more about the propertied classes who defined need and assisted the needy than it does about the poor themselves.¹⁰

The book also addresses a second set of issues. The shift in focus from social insurance to relief, charity, and welfare also entails a shift from the national state and its officials to both the local level and the voluntary sector, especially for the empire. Not only did the actual administration of poor relief lie in the hands of the cities, which retained a large degree of autonomy in the field of social policy and remained the most important providers of social services throughout the period under study here. The development of poor relief, charity, and, later, social welfare programs was largely the product of the initiative of local government officials and voluntary associations, often in collaboration with each other, and the study of voluntary action at the local level raises a number of questions that will be addressed in the following chapters: How, from the early nineteenth century onward, did these associations function as mechanisms of social governance? How did these associations serve as vehicles for the constitution of middle-class identity and the assertion of middle-class hegemony? What does the changing structure of voluntary associations and the evolving relationship between these associations and the state (i.e., the relation between state and society) tell us about German political culture in the nineteenth century and the fortunes of German liberalism? And how did the proliferation of social reform associations competing with one another for predominance within the social sector shape the structure of the public sphere?

The assistential discourses, strategies, and technologies that evolved across mid-century need to be seen as mechanisms of social governance designed to create the industrious, responsible, and thrifty familial subjects on which the stability of civil society and market economy depended. However, this was a contested process. As I argue in Chapters 3 and 6, the social reform field was populated by groups whose views on human nature, whose understanding of

¹⁰ The sources available for Germany do not generally permit the same kind of detailed parish studies that are the lifeblood of poor law historiography in other countries.

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the social problem, and whose strategies for combating it differed radically from one another, and the complex struggle among these groups to define the discourse on the social question and then to use this discursive authority to mold the needy in accordance with their own worldviews is one of the central threads in the history of social assistance in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany. While these competing views on the proper means of combating need influenced the development of assistance practice in a variety of ways, the inability to resolve these nineteenth-century culture wars, as Young-sun Hong has shown, the driving force behind the development of the corporatist organization of the social sector in twentieth-century Germany, and these conflicts ultimately played a key role in the demise of the Weimar Republic.¹¹

The process of social discipline has been presented in some accounts as a totalizing, yet subjectless, process. In this book, however, I argue that it was, in fact, driven by discrete, identifiable agents, but that, rather than depoliticizing the social question, the ideological and organizational competition among the leading social reform associations simply transformed the nature of social politics and fragmented the social domain. While much of the recent literature on German social policy and the changing meanings of the welfare state in Germany has been written under the shadow of the Holocaust and in response to the debate over Germany's fateful "special path" (*Sonderweg*) to modernity, my book rests to a large degree on an alternative interpretive framework that views the national/territorial state as only one of many actors. Correspondingly, I argue that disciplinary power and discursive authority was dispersed among a number of different agencies, including not only the local state, but also the parish, the institutional churches, employers, and – most importantly – the growing number of voluntary associations active at the local and national levels.¹²

Lastly, a few words about the geographical scope of this work. It makes little sense to speak of "Germany" in the early 1500s, and this study takes a large part of central and western Europe as its initial object before telescoping in a properly nationalist manner to focus on the territories that after 1871

¹¹ "Corporatism" is a much-debated term. Here I will use the concept – more with an eye to the Weimar Republic than to the Federal Republic – to describe a system in which public responsibility for providing for the nation's needy is delegated to the social service agencies representing the major societal groups. To the extent that the work of these agencies and their strategies for combating the diverse manifestations of need reflect the political and religious values of these groups, they facilitate the reproduction of self-enclosed, often mutually antagonistic, milieus, rather than seeking to mediate these competing values in a greater conception of the higher good. This tendency for the different groups to wall themselves off from one another leads to the notional dissolution of the *res publica*, and democratic control over these agencies is attenuated in an inverse relation to their quasi-public status and function. See Young-sun Hong, *Welfare, Modernity and the Weimar State, 1919–1933* (Princeton University Press, 1998).

¹² Dennis Sweeney, "Reconsidering the Modernity Paradigm: Reform Movements, the Social, and the State in Wilhelmine Germany," *SH* 31:4 (November 2006), 405–34; Hong, *Welfare, Modernity and the Weimar State*; and Edward Ross Dickinson, *The Politics of German Child Welfare from the Empire to the Federal Republic* (Harvard University Press, 1996).

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comprised the German Empire. Despite this geographical constriction, there is little in the story being told here that is unique to Germany. The Germans were fond of favorably comparing their own system of statutory assistance and public visiting (as organized in the Elberfeld system) with both the English poor law of 1834 and the continued French reliance on voluntary charity. However, the wide-ranging discussions that led to the formation of these different systems were framed in terms of beliefs, values, and assumptions that were the common property of the European middle classes, and the differences *between* these ideal-typical national traditions simply replicated debates and divisions that to a large degree also took place *within* each of these countries. I would like to suggest, therefore, that, despite the geographical focus on developments in Germany, the arguments advanced in this book are equally relevant for understanding the connections between poor relief, welfare, and modernity across modern Europe and the United States.