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Robert Jutte
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1 Introduction

Research and sources

Historians of early modern Europe have in recent years made great efforts to study the causes and the extent of impoverishment in Europe before 1800. Although most publications refer to specific areas – usually individual towns or provinces – they nevertheless provide us with new perspectives and insights. Despite several attempts (e.g. by C. Lis/H. Soly, J.-P. Gutton, B. Geremek, W. Fischer, Th. Riis, St. Woolf) to sum up recent research in this field, we still lack a comprehensive survey and a general study on the strategies which the poor adopted for survival, providing comparisons between various European regions and countries in the early modern period (1450–1800). While the major case-studies so far have a slight western and central European bias, an attempt is here made to draw also on research of poor relief in urban and rural communities in northern and southern Europe.

The bulk of historiographical work on the poor in the nineteenth and early twentieth century deals with the variations in attitude towards the poor taken by Protestant and Catholic governments – with major differences stemming from Luther's belief that alms-giving as a traditional Christian form of doing 'good works' did not necessarily lead to the salvation of the giver's soul. Further, laicization and rationalization of poor relief were regarded as an outcome of the Reformation. In the past few decades, however, historians have emphasized that the actual social policy of European local and national governments cut across religious boundaries and followed a pattern which was adjusted to local conditions. French, English, American and German scholars have delineated in detail the similarities and divergences in urban Catholic and Protestant programmes of relief. And there is almost a consensus among historians nowadays that the reform of poor relief took place at the local, for the most part municipal, level, and that even in England, where the reform of poor relief was undertaken at the national level, the towns played an important part in the preliminary stages of what was later known as the

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'Old Poor Law'. That a poor relief scheme had to be flexible is not only a result of modern political and social thought. The contemporaries who witnessed the paramount changes and reform projects of the early sixteenth century were already familiar with this idea. The eminent Spanish writer Juan de Medina, for example, noted: 'The poverty of people is of many kinds, and we cannot indicate a certain way of provision for them, because the change in time and in customs requires different kinds of provision: as it is the case in all other matters of government.'

By the end of Middle Ages, the faces of the poor were many in kind and in number. The poor no longer included only the traditional groups (widows, orphans, the blind, the lame) but also comprised newer kinds as well. As a large number of urban wage-earners, cottagers and day-labourers lived in circumstances which even contemporaries admitted to be extremely precarious, larger, structural and cyclical changes, such as economy, war, climate, could accelerate the impoverishment processes which had attained such enormous proportions in the sixteenth century and which remained at work throughout the early modern period. The new features of poverty awakened the curiosity as much as the fear of contemporaries. At the time the social extent of the problem grew so great that traditional charity institutions could no longer cope with this tidal wave of people in need of relief. The new quantity and quality of poverty demanded a radical departure from the beaten tracks of medieval charity. The religious and social values associated with poverty changed, although poverty and poor relief was in neither Catholic nor Protestant communities completely severed from its former strong religious connotations.

The perspective presented in this general survey has been deeply influenced by my own archival research as well as by a group of social historians whose contributions to historical demography and historical anthropology moved them away from viewing the emergence of the welfare state as the work of some reformers and governments and turned their attention instead to the rather complex role of the community and the poor themselves in the growth and development of the welfare state. Since 1980 scholars have begun to look more closely at the poor themselves and their living conditions, shedding light not only on the recipients of poor relief but also on the vast number of poor people who had to find other means to stay alive. They have managed to look directly at the lives of the poor, instead of seeing them through the eyes of governments, theologians, poor relief administrators, or alms-givers and philanthropists. While welfare historians relied in the past to a large extent on archival material that inadvertently but inevitably led to studies tracing the rise of charitable institutions and major social

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legislation, this new school of historians looks for additional sources which, for example, can tell us something about the material culture of the poor and which can also help us to explain the strategies of survival of the nearly 60 to 80 per cent of the population below or close to the poverty line.

Despite our desire to give equal space to the life of the 'ordinary poor', a substantial share of this book must necessarily be devoted to a study of the instruments of social policy as well as to the concomitants of poverty, deviance in general and vagrancy in particular. The reason is very simple. Much of the scholarship on the poor in early modern Europe has focused so far on the institutions and the politics of relief. This focus may help to explain why even the most laudable attempt to bring new perspectives into the history of poverty and deviance cannot avoid referring to the problem in terms of governmental regulation and social control.

This book is by no means a definitive or even comprehensive account of the entire field or period; to cover all aspects of the subject would require more space than a textbook allows. Rather, it is a brief review of the living conditions of the poor as well as of the poor relief policies and practices in Europe from the early sixteenth century to the end of the *ancien régime*. It attempts to bridge the gap between a collective work of many scholars and a monographic study consisting of more than one volume. Naturally some developments and phenomena are alluded to only briefly, such as the informal attempts at relief and philanthropical projects, and others had to be omitted, particularly the care for the poor within certain ethnic or religious communities (Jews, Anabaptists, Quakers, etc.). Still the book embodies what I believe to be the essence of the present state of knowledge on poor relief, poverty and deviance in early modern Europe. On the broad basis of my own extensive reading and research in this field, which I started in 1977, I have tried mainly to assemble, assimilate and synthesize the vast literature that already exists in this field; there is little here that is completely new. Writing this textbook was nevertheless an impressive, intellectually rewarding experience. I hope that it fills a major gap in the literature by combining judicious use of archival material and results of recent research with the approaches of social historians to a number of topics, such as the family, migration, voluntary associations, work, crime, neighbourhood, social segregation and mentalities.

Themes

I have chosen to follow individual themes over time, rather than to organize the material chronologically. This method enables the historian

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to show the long-term development within particular sectors, without losing sight of the social context and running the risk that the nature and significance of the overall structure of poverty in the early modern period remains elusive.

Recent developments in the history of poverty open tempting vistas. Much depends, however, on the expressiveness and informational value of the available sources. Abundant official records survive – poor law disbursements, hospital administration registers, petitions and judicial files – sufficiently rich to hold out hopes of systematic and even statistical analysis. However, when attempting to diverge from a history seen through the eyes of legislators, reformers, pedagogues, theologians and the like, one normally comes across sources which pose grave interpretative problems. How does one disentangle, for example, the experience of the poor from the language of the recording agency, be he poor relief administrator or hospital official? Before we can describe how socio-economic problems and poor relief related to each other, we must therefore examine the perceptions of poverty and the poor during the transition from the Middle Ages to the early modern period. That will be the task of Chapter 2, which will deal with images of the poor. Images can be produced and promoted by various means; language is only one of them. Although there is always some dissonance between language and social reality, the analysis of vocabulary used to describe the various degrees of poverty and indigence, taken in conjunction with other facts, may focus attention upon a less well-known dimension of the overall and perennial problem. Like linguistic evidence, visual images of the poor attest the increasing interest of the public in poverty and poor relief from the Middle Ages onwards. The variety of roles represented by the poor in the various media suggests therefore a complex perception of the social order in the period under study. According to recent research in this field there can be no doubt that the language of poverty and pictorial evidence should be taken seriously, both as an insight into the mentality of the ruling classes and as a realistic reflection of the world of destitution and marginality.

Poverty had many faces and causes in a pre-industrial society such as early modern Europe, and we will turn to this in more detail in Chapter 3. Economic fluctuations, wars, illness and natural catastrophes are traditional explanations of poverty. Recent research has emphasized the role of un- and underemployment as a cause for mass impoverishment. One of the most fruitful developments in recent years has been, however, the shift towards a more dynamic conception of poverty, stressing, for example, the importance of the life-cycle ('nuclear hardship hypothesis'). Summing up the discussion of the different causes and explana-

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tions of poverty, this chapter will show the importance of structural and biological causes as being responsible for the precarious conditions of many people living below or around the poverty line.

Chapter 4 will argue not only that there is a lack of quantitative information over the extent of poverty, but that historians also have problems of selection and evaluation of the criteria according to which comparison about the extent of poverty in various countries can be made. The same problem exists in the prevalence of poverty over time. The sources present us with groups of people who have been labelled 'poor' according to criteria that are often vague and that always vary according to the society, the institution, the period and the place. Detailed enquiries into the numbers, living conditions and needs of the poor date back to many decades before the Reformation. Most of the historical data available seem to overlook the large and floating population, though they always include – alongside the able-bodied local beggars – aged or infirm individuals to whom some form of charity or alms were given. The distortions in recent estimates result from the different interpretations of the various categories of deprivation and poverty. The range of the criteria employed by modern historians implies that the data-sets and figures are not strictly comparable and can only be regarded as an approximation to reality. All scholars agree, however, on one issue, namely that there was a sharp difference between the city and the countryside.

The distinction between the worthy and the undeserving poor has attracted considerable literature because of its multiple implications, practical, ideological and symbolic. The second part of this book is devoted to this privileged group of the poor. In Chapter 5 we will look at the living conditions of the resident poor. Very few studies have concentrated so far on the mental attitudes of the local poor and on the miseries which they faced in everyday life. How did they experience their situation? This chapter attempts to reconstruct their material culture (nutrition, housing, clothing) and the mentality which it fostered.

'Charity begins at home' – this famous English proverb characterizes one of the most important though often neglected forms of coping with poverty. In order to survive people could seldom rely on charity or poor relief but had to activate social networks (family, neighbours, friends, employers) of which they were part. Others were forced to migrate (subsistence migration) in order to escape their present state of misery and deprivation. The happy few who received public poor relief had to adapt themselves to the standards of the institutions which granted alms and – in some cases – even provided existence allowances. We will trace these powerful strategies of survival in Chapter 6.

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With the increase of pauperism, the poor constituted a menace to public order. New schemes of poor relief were introduced in order to deal with the new situation. Major institutional changes occurred in the early sixteenth century and were to continue in successive waves until the early nineteenth century. The chronology of these institutional changes differed across early modern Europe. The same applies to the forces (private, municipal, ecclesiastical, governmental) which motivated them. Chapter 7 attempts to give for the first time a typology of poor relief schemes in early modern western Europe based on structural, organizational and functional variables. Only within a general European framework can such early examples of a social welfare be evaluated and more subtly nuanced. For the sake of clarity it seems useful to introduce a rough bi-polar typology. The two ideal types could then be defined as a centralized form of poor relief on the one hand, and as a more decentralized one on the other. The latter seems to be typical for Catholic states while the first type was prevalent in Protestant communities.

The last part of this book deals with the 'undeserving' poor who were denied charity and relief because of their deviant behaviour. Idleness, petty theft, vagrancy and prostitution were the most common infractions of the law connected with poverty. The various forms of poverty-born deviance will be the subject of Chapter 8. As we will see, this problem is not unrelated to the rise of new attitudes towards the poor in general, yet it is not simply an offshoot of that development.

Poverty as such was not degrading. However, as early as the fifteenth century the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor became part of the discriminatory social policy towards beggars. The partition line between those who merited assistance and the unworthy was very often not clear. Nevertheless, governments were busy punishing offences brought forth by a new concept of collective crime which is usually summarized under the heading 'vagrancy'. This concept involved a variety of measures against rogues and 'sturdy' or able-bodied beggars. Such a discriminatory philosophy encouraged a social policy which encapsulated the three characteristics of marginalization: stigmatization, segregation and punishment. We will discuss these measures in Chapter 9.

Recent research provides new evidence that the literary portrayal of vagrancy and marginality should be taken seriously and not excluded without further ado as pure fantasy or fiction. Chapter 10 argues that the so-called 'literature of roguery' is a valuable source for the reconstruction of the subculture of poverty. The enforcement of social discipline and the penalization of begging and vagrancy met with resistance. Those who were accused by the authorities of being a threat to public morality and

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order adopted strategies of survival, which somebody from outside might view as ephemeral anti-societies consisting of outsiders, unified by their way of life and certain values. Some of the cases which we examine do indeed suggest that socially marginalized groups of people formed a kind of subculture. The reactions to repressive strategies of local and national government were, however, limited. The deviant poor had in most cases only three options: self-organization, rebellion and (e)migration.

Analysis of the resemblances as well as the differences in the nature of poverty and its treatment today and in the past we must reserve for the concluding chapter, which will serve to sum up and to bring into perspective what we have examined throughout the book.

Last but not least, the reader should be encouraged to look at and to make use of the chronological chart and the short biographies of eminent poor relief reformers, which have been added to the book to remind students that social history cannot do without the history of events and the actions of individual men. It was actually the eminent French historian Fernand Braudel, often considered a 'structuralist', who suggested we divide historical time into geographical time, social time and individual time.

Finally, a word on the footnotes and bibliography is in order. This book is meant for a wide readership. Since it contains information accumulated from many sources, books and articles over a period of years, it would be impractical to cite all the material used. So I have used notes sparingly, and, for the most part, only to locate a quotation from contemporary sources. At the end of the book, however, I have included a bibliography in which the reader may find the most important books and articles on the particular subjects discussed in the various chapters. Headings have been used to facilitate orientation. Although many of the studies could have been listed in several places, for reason of space I have double-listed these sources only in those cases where it is absolutely necessary. These include many of the more general titles, which students might find useful for further reading. In any case I do hope to have indicated in the bibliography those authors and works from which I have borrowed most.

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2 Images of poverty

The language of poverty

Language can be a guide to social reality. But historians often have to be reminded that the study of language is more than an 'academic exercise in semantics' (Asa Briggs). This point can be amplified by reference to the kinship vocabulary which reflects the important kin relationships in a society. And it is not only kinship terms which may reflect the structure of society. The language of poverty, for example, reveals much about the differences between our modern society and the pre-industrial society under study here. Although there is always some dissonance between language and reality, the vocabulary used for describing various degrees of poverty and indigence, taken in conjunction with other facts, may be an important social indicator. As society is reflected in language this way, social change can produce a corresponding semantic change. If, for example, the structure of early modern society altered radically so that it came to resemble more closely a class society than a society of orders, we would expect the linguistic system to alter correspondingly. This has indeed happened. According to a recent study the changes that were taking place in the idea of poverty and the image of the poor during the late eighteenth century led to the increasing use of the 'language of class' (Gertrud Himmelfarb) to define poverty and to describe the poor. Class in the modern sense only came into existence, as Marxist historians have pointed out, at the historical moment when classes began to acquire consciousness of themselves as such. This consciousness expresses itself in language and ideas as well as behaviour. Late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century England was, however, not yet a fully developed class society. The fact that terms like 'workmen', 'people' and 'poor' still figured prominently in the public discourse shows that the language of class had not yet replaced the 'old' language of 'orders', 'ranks', 'sorts' and 'degrees', in which the terms 'rich' and 'poor' suggested the idea of godly, orderly, stable and organic society. Until the end of the *ancien régime* the vocabulary of poverty still carried with it medieval

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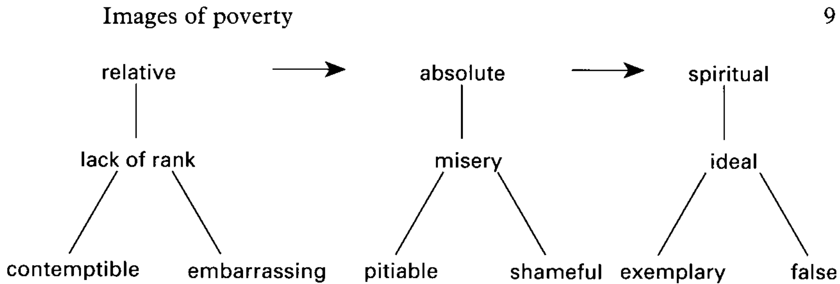

Figure 1 Components of meaning
Source: Roch, *Vocabulaire*, p. 285.

connotations of social relations, defined largely in terms of birth and mutual dependency. 'Thus we saie that the poor are made for the good of the ritche',[1] declares an anonymous English writer at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, and he could be sure that many of his contemporaries still agreed with him, seeing the poor as an integral part of a Christian commonwealth and a necessary stimulus for the rich to practise virtue and to show humility. In pre-industrial Europe poverty was more than a certain lack of material goods or just a relation between means and ends, it was above all seen as a subordinating relation between people.

There has been a marked social and political change and this has been accompanied by a corresponding change in the meaning of the word 'poverty' and its equivalents in other European languages. Whereas 'poverty' has a rather narrow meaning today, it had in medieval and early modern times a much broader semantic scope and also more connotations (see Figure 1). In early modern English 'poverty' has, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the following meanings: (1) the condition of having little or no wealth or material possession; (2) the deficiency in the proper or desired (social) status or quality; (3) dearth, scarcity; (4) poor condition of the body, feebleness resulting from insufficient nourishment. 'Poor', therefore, expresses more than just the opposite of 'rich' or 'wealthy'. It not only indicates the various degrees of poverty (absolute, relative and spiritual), but is basically evaluative, saying that a person is such, or so circumstanced, as to excite one's compassion or contempt. These evaluative meanings of 'rich' and 'poor' are logically distinct from other semantic polarities (e.g. young v. old, large v. small), because we cannot discuss their implications of truth value without distinguishing 'true for Mr X', 'true for Miss Y'. While contemporaries could and did make these subjective distinctions, the historian has to take these evaluative terms at face value. The sources present him with groups

[1] 'Of poore and rytche', *c.* 1600, British Libary, Harleian MS 1713:18, f. 129r.

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1 MISERY	2 NECESSITY	3 NAKEDNESS	4 SUFFERING
(a) indigence	(a) want	(a) nudity	(a) exhaustion
(b) dearth	(b) need	(b) ruin	(b) pain
(c) suffrance	(c) extreme need	(c) solitude	(c) melancholy

Figure 2 Synonyms of 'poverty'
Source: Roch, *Vocabulaire*, pp. 286ff.

or individuals who have been labelled 'poor' according to criteria that are often vague and not always understandable. He must therefore keep in mind that the norm behind the polarity between 'rich' and 'poor' is subjective and speaker-related.

In order to understand what language reveals about the perception of the poor and the values associated with the poor in the period under study, we have to look not only for antonyms (words of opposite meaning) but for words with semantic relatedness. The following English terms, which have their equivalent in other European languages, are used throughout the late medieval and early modern period to describe various aspects of 'poverty' (see Figure 2).

Some of these synonyms refer to the relative nature of poverty. One is always poorer or better-off than someone else, and in a variety of ways, ranging for example, from states of wanting means to procure the comforts or necessaries of life to mental and physical conditions. This scheme brings out two other specific aspects of poverty in addition to deprivation, want and insecurity. The first is the anonymity or solitude that comes from helplessness or powerlessness, and the second the constant or temporary deficiency of some desirable quality or inferiority, which made people in the eyes of their contemporaries not only pitiable but sometimes also despicable. In the beginning of the early modern period a poor man might still be described as one who was 'ready to starve for want of bread' or as 'one that wants things needful to him'. Later on, in the seventeenth century, the term 'poor' referred not only to those in necessitous or humble circumstances but specifically to those dependent on charitable or parochial relief. And it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that a clear line was drawn between poverty on the one hand and indigence on the other, between the masses of the labouring poor and those being so destitute as to be dependent on gifts or allowances for subsistence.

How the poor and the various degrees or features of their poverty were seen, classified and described by contemporaries varied greatly according to the people, the institution, the period and obviously the place. From the standpoint of early modern administrators and social reformers, the

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