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## CHAPTER I

*Introduction: Roman poverty in context**Robin Osborne*

What are we studying when we study poverty? Are we studying the social and economic structure that means that a proportion of the population has barely adequate access to the resources required for life? Or are we studying those in a society who at any moment happen to have less than some particular, and more or less arbitrary, threshold of resources? Or again, are we studying how the society in question analyses its own structure, how it classifies those with least resources, what it does about them and how it justifies to itself what it does or does not do?

Studying poverty in contemporary societies is closely linked to the question of what to do about it; ‘make poverty history’ is the political slogan of 2005. Doing something about it depends on understanding the nature of the problem to begin with. Are the poor a random collection of people who for different reasons have fallen on hard times but can be expected to improve their lot in better times (‘conjunctural poverty’ as it is sometimes called)? Or are the poor trapped by the structure of economic system, whether that be feudalism, capitalism, or whatever, so that in good times as well as hard times they will remain impoverished (‘structural poverty’)? Is poverty an economic problem (because a given society does not produce enough resources to go round), or is it a social problem (because the resources are there but for social reasons are maldistributed)?

Understanding poverty in the contemporary world is inevitably a political matter, and the politics do not always assist the understanding. For this reason, it can help us to see the issues involved if we study poverty in a historic society, particularly in one well removed from the roots of twenty-first century social and economic problems. Studying poverty in the Roman world – and in this volume we are primarily concerned with the Roman world in the first four centuries AD – has a peculiar interest. The size of the city of Rome – the first western city to reach a million inhabitants – created issues of food supply quite unlike those faced by Greek city-states or even the great Hellenistic cities, and the equally unprecedented size of Rome’s

empire meant that Roman government could both call upon an extraordinarily diverse productive base and had responsibility for ensuring the well-being of the isolated as well as of those at the centre. Rome thus gives a case study in the sustenance of a population that is extremely unequally distributed in a world where communications were slow and uncertain. But Rome is also of particular interest because the arrival of Christianity gives an opportunity to examine the impact of changing systems of belief upon the classification of and attitudes towards the poor.

#### PAST WORK ON ROMAN POVERTY

'There are no studies specifically on poverty in ancient Rome'. So C. R. Whittaker, in his chapter on 'The poor' in Giardina's collection originally published as *L'uomo Romano*.<sup>1</sup> Since these words were published in 1989, poverty at Rome has begun to attract more attention. Peter Brown's *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* has brought to the forefront of discussion issues of the changing position of and attitudes towards the poor in late antiquity, which were flagged up long ago by Bolkestein and reinforced by Patlagean. In addition, Marcus Prell has given us a socio-economic study of poverty in Rome between the Gracchi and Diocletian.<sup>2</sup> What is more, detailed work has been done on poverty in specific areas of the Roman empire.<sup>3</sup>

Two related issues dominate discussions of the poor in the Roman world: the emergence of the poor as a distinct social group, and the changing ways in which poverty is represented and the poor are thought about. Although throughout Greek and Roman history it was acknowledged that some men were poor, only in the late Roman Republic and the imperial period did poverty begin to be seen as a social and political problem which required some sort of consistent and systematic treatment, and even then the poor never came to constitute a distinct class.<sup>4</sup> It was not until the early empire, as Bolkestein stressed, that people began less to think of the poor as necessarily morally corrupt and more to see giving monetary relief to the poor as a virtue. Once this alteration in the view of the poor had occurred, the beneficence which had earlier been bestowed upon communities generally, and to which the work of Veyne has done so much to attract attention, came to be seen as properly directed at the poor.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Whittaker (1993) 299.

<sup>2</sup> Bolkestein (1939); Patlagean (1977); Brown (2002); Prell (1997).

<sup>3</sup> Hamel (1989); Holman (2001). <sup>4</sup> Prell (1997) ch. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Veyne (1990); on which see Garnsey (1991b)

Much recent scholarship has repeated the idea that there was a move from a civic notion of virtue, in which it was the general well-being of the whole community which was promoted by the well-doing of the rich, to a more narrowly economic definition of benefaction, in which largesse consisting in money or consumable goods was bestowed specifically upon the impoverished. There is no general agreement, however, about the date of the change of attitude, and the reason for it. For Bolkestein, whose study of pre-Christian antiquity embraced Egypt and Israel as well as Greece and Rome, the change was visible as early as the first century AD, and was consequent upon oriental influence which caused priority to be given to poor relief in the Graeco-Roman world just as poor relief had been given priority in Israel. Bolkestein thought it significant that Seneca, in *Letters to Lucilius* 95.51, included giving a coin to the beggar and a crust to the starving in an otherwise tralatitian list of minimum moral demands on any man (on which see Parkin, below p. 66). He noted parallels with Philo and Josephus, and saw the mark of eastern influence.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, for Patlagean and for Brown this same change is a feature of late antiquity, emerging 'slowly in centuries that followed the conversion of Constantine in 312'.<sup>7</sup> But whereas for Patlagean the crucial factor was a massive change in the structure of late antique society in general, partly consequent on significant demographic change, for Brown, as his choice of 312 as a key date indicates, the crucial factor was the influence of Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

One major weakness to date of work on poverty in the Roman world has been the absence of any study which spans the whole period from Republic to late antiquity: Bolkestein and Prell stop with the rise of Christianity, Brown and Patlagean show no great interest in the Roman world in the pre-Christian period. A second is that those who, like Bolkestein, Hands, and Brown, interest themselves in attitudes to the poor tend to look only superficially at what it was actually to be poor, while those who, like Prell and Patlagean, interest themselves in the actual conditions of the poor pay little attention to ideas about the poor. Peter Garnsey's scholarship is marked by a unique interest in the ways in which ideas played themselves out in practice – in the relationship between legal privilege and social status, in ideas of slavery and the conditions of the slave, in how the nutritional value of foods and conventional attitudes to foodstuffs relate to their consumption

<sup>6</sup> Philo ap. Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 358d; Josephus, *Ap.* 2.29.1; for some questioning of the truth of this see Hands (1968) 84.

<sup>7</sup> Brown (2002) 111.

<sup>8</sup> Brown (2002) 75–6 for arguments against Patlagean. With Brown's own position compare also the conclusion of Prell (1997) 296.

and its consequences.<sup>9</sup> In this collection of essays by his pupils, brought together to honour Peter and to demonstrate something of what we have learned from him, we attempt to bridge both the divide between poverty as image and poverty as reality and the divide between earlier and later Roman empire in a set of papers which discuss both the realities and the representation of poverty in the Roman world both before and after the conversion of Constantine. In this introduction I outline the big issues involved by asking whether there was anything distinctive about poverty in the Roman world, by asking how the representation of poverty at Rome compares with the representation of poverty in the Greek world, and by offering a synopsis of the chapters which follow.

#### WAS ROMAN POVERTY DISTINCTIVE?

The Roman world was pre-industrial. Its economy was fundamentally based in agriculture, and its population was largely rural. In modern terminology 'the Roman economy was underdeveloped'.<sup>10</sup> Life expectancy was low (life expectancy at birth was somewhere between twenty and thirty and probably closer to twenty).<sup>11</sup> Nutritional deficiencies were widespread.<sup>12</sup> But in none of these features was the Roman world clearly distinct from the Hellenistic world or from the world of the archaic and classical Greek city-state.

Poverty in this pre-industrial world was largely determined by access to land.<sup>13</sup> Those who owned, or were able to secure the rental of, land could secure their subsistence provided that the area of land at their disposal was large enough, and the climatic conditions favourable enough. How large the plot of land needed to be has been much debated: it is clear that the productivity of land is directly related to the labour put into it – gardening is more productive per unit area than farming – but also that the law of diminishing returns applies – repeatedly doubling the number of gardeners does not repeatedly double the output of the garden.<sup>14</sup> What counts as favourable climatic conditions depends upon the nature of the land ('the grimness of the terrain'<sup>15</sup>) and the crops grown (barley can withstand drier conditions than wheat). What it is possible or reasonable to grow, however, will often, in turn, depend upon the relationship of the farmer to the market: farming régimes that optimise the yield of the land in calorific

<sup>9</sup> Garnsey (1970), (1988), (1996), (1999). <sup>10</sup> Garnsey and Saller (1987) 43.

<sup>11</sup> See Scheidel (2001b) and chapter 3 below; cf. Brown (2002) 52, citing Simon Keay's work on Tarraco.

<sup>12</sup> Garnsey (1999). <sup>13</sup> Garnsey (1998) 201–13, esp. 213.

<sup>14</sup> See most recently the papers in Van der Veen (2005), and especially Jones (2005).

<sup>15</sup> Garnsey (1999) 1 (specifically of Palestine).

terms may not produce the kind of food a family needs to consume. In general large landowners do better than small out of drought conditions, but how badly the small farmer fares will depend upon access to the market.<sup>16</sup> Many people, therefore, had reason to be anxious about food, but for those who had access to land the threat of hunger was episodic, not endemic.<sup>17</sup>

Not all who were without land or access to land were impoverished. From the eighth century BC onwards in both Greece and Italy there was significant urbanisation.<sup>18</sup> Although the proportion of the population employed in craft activity or service industries of one sort or another never approached the proportion employed in agriculture, nevertheless a significant number of people was securely fed, and in some cases significantly enriched, by non-agricultural activities. Towns were an important focus of such activities, though not the only one: those activities which depended upon the exploitation of natural resources – above all mining – were necessarily located in the countryside. Political developments further diversified the possible sources of livelihood: at any one time a large number of mercenary troops, infantry or rowers, were to be found in active service in the classical or Hellenistic Greek worlds.

Since land was the main acceptable security for loans, it was hard for those without land to achieve wealth, but in times of plenty all who were able-bodied could expect to subsist. In the country even those who did not own land could gather food from the land beyond cultivation.<sup>19</sup> What was gathered could be consumed directly or marketed in towns and villages. In the town there were possibilities of casual employment that might involve working alongside slaves but which would give an irregular income.<sup>20</sup> For the able-bodied, poverty was conjunctural.

Times of dearth divided communities between those who had and those who had not managed to fill their storehouses. Those compelled to pay the soaring prices of foodstuffs in the market quickly found their conditions of life deteriorating as the need to secure food caused other economic activity to contract. It was in such times that individuals were no doubt tempted to sell themselves or their children into slavery – a practice legislated against by Solon in Athens but still encountered by Augustine.<sup>21</sup>

For those who were not able-bodied, all times were times of dearth. The disabled relied on the charity of their families, their friends, and ultimately

<sup>16</sup> Garnsey (1998) 212.      <sup>17</sup> Garnsey (1988), (1999) 2.

<sup>18</sup> For a survey of early urbanisation in the Mediterranean see Osborne and Cunliffe (2005).

<sup>19</sup> See, for twentieth-century Greece, Clark (1976), (1997), Forbes (1997).

<sup>20</sup> Brown (2002) 50–51 on cities constructing a safety net for the destitute; but I am sceptical about his claim that the real poor were in the countryside.

<sup>21</sup> Brown (2002) 63 on Augustine.

of strangers. If they exhausted local charity and moved away to seek alms from larger pools of beneficence they risked finding themselves isolated from all with whom they had affective bonds. For such people, poverty was structural.

Both in Greek city-states and during much of the Roman Republic political status was of greater significance than levels of wealth. As a result, the poor were not thought of as a distinct social group. It is true that Greek city-states, including democratic Athens, and Republican Rome both restricted certain economic opportunities (above all landownership) to citizens and made certain political rights depend upon wealth. In this way rights of participation might be curtailed, both theoretically and practically, by poverty. However, citizenship and the legal privileges which went with it were forfeited only by seriously unbecoming conduct. Citizens, however indigent, remained distinct in their political rights from both free non-citizens and slaves, and the possession of citizenship and freedom, in that order, were ideologically, if not always practically, privileged over considerations of wealth. The importance of political status that Finley saw as rendering Marxist class analysis unsuitable for the ancient world ruled out the perception, or self-perception, of 'the poor' as a particular group just as it ruled out the development of a 'working class'.<sup>22</sup>

What scholars call 'civic' models of poor relief are based on the privileging of political status over economic need. The sharing out among all citizens of the profits that had accrued to a polis is attested for the archaic period, when the Siphnians shared the profits of the silver mines there, and later, in the early fifth century, when Themistocles intervened to boost the Athenian navy at the expense of such a hand-out in Athens.<sup>23</sup> Acts of beneficence (*euergesia*) by rich individuals towards their communities are attested in Greek cities from the classical period onwards and become increasingly prominent in later Greek epigraphy from the Hellenistic and Graeco-Roman worlds. But 'very few euergetists would have described what they were doing as poor relief'.<sup>24</sup>

The principles of sharing out city resources were applied also to the sharing out of grain. At times of crisis city magistrates might be charged with buying grain, and might distribute it at a fixed price, but the principle of distribution was that it was to citizens.<sup>25</sup> However, it is with the question of grain distribution and its recipients that we encounter Roman

<sup>22</sup> Finley (1973) 49.

<sup>23</sup> Herodotus 3.57.2 for Siphnos, 8.144.1–2 and [Aristotle] *Ath. Pol.* 22.7 for Themistocles; Humphreys (1976) 145 for the general principle.

<sup>24</sup> Garnsey and Saller (1987) 101. <sup>25</sup> All this definitively documented in Garnsey (1988).

distinctiveness. Finley observed that at Rome the decision in 58 BC to distribute free grain again restricted recipients to citizens, but he stressed that in this instance ‘the ancient sources are unanimous in their view of the dole as a form of poor relief won by the plebs after considerable struggle’.<sup>26</sup> Why was grain distribution regarded like this at Rome when it had not been so regarded in other cities of the Greek or Roman world? Despite emphasising the exceptional nature of this Finley offers no discussion of the reasons for the exceptional conception of grain distribution at Rome.<sup>27</sup> Two factors can, however, surely be isolated. One is the sheer size of the population of Rome in the late Republic, the other is the potential political power of the Roman poor. Each of these demands some further discussion.

The economic impact of Rome’s unprecedented size was first drawn to ancient historians’ attention by Keith Hopkins, in an unpublished paper, and it has been set out in detail by Neville Morley.<sup>28</sup> The concentration of people in Rome created demands for both foodstuffs and other basic necessities of life, such as clothing and housing, and also for the goods required to secure and display status in a place where all ranks of society gathered. A city of a million inhabitants that was the centre of an empire extending all round the Mediterranean and beyond was quite unlike any other town or city. Along with Rome’s peculiar demands for goods went also demands for labour, not least to sustain a supply system that had to draw on the surplus of a much wider area than any other city and to ensure that the goods required reached those who needed them.

As far as the way in which the poor were perceived and perceived themselves is concerned, however, what was important about Rome was not that its economy was differently configured but that the sheer number of citizens present in Rome meant that the fiction of the citizen state could no longer be maintained. As recent work has made ever more clear, only a tiny proportion of citizens resident in Rome could ever physically cast their vote in a Roman voting assembly, let alone have their votes make any difference to the result.<sup>29</sup> As Aristotle had pointed out, if a population grew to beyond a few thousand citizens the organisation of the city-state would be threatened, since no herald would be physically able to address them all (*Politics* 1326b). The citizen population of Rome could no longer envisage

<sup>26</sup> Finley (1973) 170–71 with second edition (1985) 201; and cf. 40.

<sup>27</sup> Finley (1973) 201–2 devotes rather more space to the question of the reasons for Trajan’s *alimenta* schemes, withdrawing his initial support for Veyne’s view that the motivation was demographic and preferring to see the projection of the emperor’s power as the crucial factor.

<sup>28</sup> Morley (1996). Hopkins was inspired by Wrigley (1967) on London.

<sup>29</sup> Mouritsen (2001), engaging with Millar (1998).



itself as a distinct community when it could neither gather together in one place nor engage together in even the most minor of political activities. Sheer weight of numbers crushed both the distinction between citizens and other urban residents and the political machinery invented for a small town. The breakdown of the political machinery manifested itself in the politics of violence, the destruction of the distinction between citizens and other urban residents manifested itself in the birth of the poor. It is no accident that the Clodius who introduced the free grain dole was also the prime exponent of political violence.<sup>30</sup>

But if the sheer size of Rome made it inevitable that the meaning of citizenship would be transformed, it was Roman imperialism that spread awareness of, and self-awareness among, the poor, and in two ways. First, the incoming wealth of empire encouraged everyone to have higher hopes of material riches. 'Debates over poverty . . . tend to flourish in the context of rising expectations.'<sup>31</sup> Second, in order to ensure that Rome could raise the size of army required to maintain and expand its empire, Rome abolished the traditional requirement that to serve as a soldier one had to possess a certain (gradually reduced) level of property.

Rome's need for military manpower on a scale, both in terms of numbers and in terms of length of service, quite different from that of any Greek city, impacted directly upon the economic and political ambitions of the citizen body. The lowering and eventual abolition of the property qualification for legionary service during the second century BC fundamentally altered the relationship between the army and the land.<sup>32</sup> It also meant that at the end of every military campaign poor Roman citizens were in a position, with the minimum of organisation, to make their presence felt in such numbers that traditional means of expressing political views, such as the ballot box, became irrelevant. Although Catiline's conspiracy seems in the end actually not to have mobilised the poor in significant numbers, and although many of Clodius' activities themselves relied not upon the poor but upon slaves, the potential that had been feared in 63 BC and was then enabled by the tribune's legislation of 58 BC was real enough. Other cities needed to provide a cushion for their whole population only in times of crisis in the grain supply; at Rome, by contrast, the abolition of property qualifications for military service led to an identification between legionary and landless such that there was a permanent need to provide subsidised food for the landless citizen poor.

<sup>30</sup> On violence in Rome see Nippel (1995).

<sup>31</sup> Shaw (2002) 43.

<sup>32</sup> So, famously, Brunt (1962/1988).



Augustus famously acknowledged the political importance of grain distributions when he refrained from abolishing them on the grounds that they were bound to be reintroduced at some point *per ambitionem* (Suet. *Aug.* 42.3). The senatorial aristocracy in the late Republic and the new régime in the early principate cashed in grain for power. In the late empire, as the city of Rome itself lost its overwhelming dominance, it was a more general concern for the poor that emperors cashed in for power. Peter Brown insists on the continued importance of political interests when he argues that the emergence of a discourse on the poor in the fourth century was directly related to the need of the new (Christian) imperial state to assert its presence.

It is hard to separate the transformation that the size of Rome brought about in the effective civic status of its poor inhabitants from that which it wrought in their material conditions. For all the importance of urban neighbourhoods, clichés about the deracination and anonymisation of the individual in the metropolis retain their force: Rome remained notable into late antiquity for the presence of a population living ‘informally in the crevices of the towering buildings, sleeping rough in *tabernae* or huddled in the vaults beneath the seating of theatres, circuses and amphitheatres’.<sup>33</sup> On the one hand, the system necessary to provision the huge urban population inevitably involved a level of wastage sufficient to support significant numbers; on the other, those who wanted to be regarded as the greatest men in the city had not only to cream off the wealth of empire to build houses and gardens of extraordinary luxury but also to be seen to have throngs of men dependent upon them. The *princeps* sustained his position as *primus inter pares* by ensuring that the calendar of the poor as well as the well-to-do was structured around festivals and events that were linked to himself and that brought material as well as immaterial pleasures to all.<sup>34</sup>

If the growth of Rome and Roman imperialism had already destroyed the civic ideal in Rome itself by the late Republic, that ideal continued to thrive outside Rome. Some of the clearest manifestations of civic benefaction come from the cities of Italy and the Greek east in the first and second centuries AD. But as the Roman world gradually transformed itself from a collection of semi-autonomous cities subordinated to the power of an alien Rome, and to a single political and economic unit, the civic ideal came under pressure outside Rome also. The provincial elite were incorporated into central government through recruitment to the senate

<sup>33</sup> Purcell (1996) 784, citing Ammianus Marcellinus 14.6.25.

<sup>34</sup> Purcell (1996) 799–806.

or to the imperial service: 'provincial wealth flowed to Rome as they purchased houses on the Esquiline and in other fashionable areas and set up their considerable establishments'.<sup>35</sup> Initially such men continued to wish to display themselves to their native communities through benefactions, but the more local citizenship came to be a matter of obligations rather than of opportunities, the more the old civic idealism became irrelevant to the way in which people's lives were organised and envisaged. Division between those who were in a position actively to participate in imperial rule (essentially the wealthy and those who served in the legions), and those who were not, became formalised already under Hadrian in the distinction between *honestiores* and *humiliores*.<sup>36</sup> When Caracalla extended citizenship to all free-born inhabitants of the empire in the *Constitutio Antoniniana* of AD 212, the civic model was doomed. Where there was no distinction of political status to back them up, distinctions of social status could not survive unless they were also distinctions of economic status. The death of the city-state inevitably brought about the birth of the poor.

Looked at from the bottom up, the Roman world was recognisably the same under-developed world as the world of classical Greek city-states or Hellenistic kings. Political unification had an economic impact, reducing the risks and therefore the costs of long-distance transport. This speeded up the 'brownian motion' which had, as Horden and Purcell have taught us, long been a feature of the Mediterranean's corrupting sea, and so enabled both the primate city and the leading men to become far wealthier. But those changes occurred within an unchanged economic structure within which even the achievement of per capita economic growth is debated.<sup>37</sup>

The revolution which was effected by the Roman empire was not economic (or socio-economic) but political (or socio-political). Roman conquest and Rome's own revolution from city-state to imperial power brought about the slow decline in the domination of the civic ideal over the self-perception of the free inhabitants of the empire. The habit of defining oneself in contrast to various Others, which has been seen as so central to classical Greeks,<sup>38</sup> could no longer be sustained when some of the fundamental divisions upon which it rested were first effectively and then formally dissolved in a world empire. As the myth collapsed according to which the citizens of each city-state were peculiar and particular, a myth which had successfully prevented material circumstances from bringing

<sup>35</sup> Edwards and Woolf (2003b) 11.

<sup>36</sup> Garnsey (1970) ch. 11.

<sup>37</sup> Garnsey and Saller (1987) 51–63.

<sup>38</sup> Cartledge (1993).