

## THE RELIGIOUS DUTY OF CARE AND THE SOCIAL NEED FOR CONTROL IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

*Poverty and deviance in early modern Europe.* By Robert Jütte. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Pp. xvi + 239. £9.95 (p/b).

*Underworlds. Organized crime in the Netherlands, 1650–1800.* By Florike Egmond. Oxford: Polity Press, 1993. Pp. x + 256. £39.50.

*Always among us. Images of the poor in Zwingli's Zurich.* By Lee Palmer Wandel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Pp. vii + 199. £35.

*Domestic strategies: work and the family in France and Italy, 1600–1800.* Edited by Stuart Woolf. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Pp. viii + 207. £30.

The historiography of poverty and poor relief in early modern Europe has its roots in the late Victorian era. This particular historical interest was undoubtedly inspired by the general concern for social reforms which characterized the late nineteenth century. Since then, these topics have continued to attract the interest of historians, but the preoccupation with poverty and the associated aspect of social deviance have witnessed an explosive growth since the late 1960s. Unfortunately, as pointed out by Robert Jütte, this considerable scholarly output over the last twenty-five years has not generated anything near to a comprehensive picture of the changes in poverty and poor relief which took place across early modern Europe. Most case studies have focused exclusively on Western and Central Europe.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Jütte might have added that the comparative aspects have been sadly neglected, something, however, which his own work goes some way to remedy, restricted only by the lack of detailed research in certain geographical areas.<sup>2</sup>

Another consequence of the intellectual climate of the 1960s has been the near total removal of religion as a motivator and driving force behind the re-organization of poor relief which took place in the sixteenth century. Consequently, the significance of the Reformation for the changes in early modern social policy has come to be seen as negligible. Instead, it has become generally accepted among historians that neither catholicism nor protestantism played a significant part in the transformation of poor relief which took place in this period, such as the pooling of revenues and resources in a common fund, 'the common chest' and the centralization of relief agencies. These reforms are now seen as inspired by civic leaders working for social equilibrium within their communities and their Christian humanist friends who were responding not to

<sup>1</sup> For a comparative study of northern Europe, see O. P. Grell et al. (eds.), *Health care provision and poor relief in northern protestant Europe 1500–1700* ((forthcoming, London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> A few comparative studies have been undertaken, but they have all been limited to the comparison of a couple of cities. For France, see J.-P. Gutton, *La société et les pauvres. L'exemple de la généralité de Lyon 1534–1789* (Paris, 1971) (Lyon compared with some smaller cities in southern France); for Germany, see T. Fischer, *Städtische Armut und Armenfürsorge im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert. Sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen am Beispiel der Städte Basel, Freiburg i. Br. und Strassburg* (Göttingen 1979), and R. Jütte, *Obrigkeithliche Armenfürsorge in deutschen Reichsstädten der frühen Neuzeit. Städtisches Armenwesen in Frankfurt am Main und Köln* (Cologne, 1984).

religious needs and wishes for reform, but to the general economic and social changes of the period.

This view was first articulated by Natalie Davis in her seminal and incredibly influential article, 'Poor relief, humanism and heresy', first published in 1968.<sup>3</sup> It has subsequently been confirmed by most of the leading scholars in this field, such as Robert Jütte, Brian Pullan, Paul Slack and Hugo Soly.<sup>4</sup> Occasionally, these scholars have acknowledged that differences between catholic and protestant welfare arrangements existed, but even so, they tend to consider them to have been of a cosmetic rather than of a constituent nature.

That religion has been removed from this agenda can undoubtedly be interpreted as a healthy reaction to what had until then been a field dominated by a confessionally biased historiography. Furthermore, that this response should have emerged in the radical cultural climate of the late 1960s, fascinated, as it was, with sociology and under the impact of neo-Marxism, can hardly surprise. In view of the fact that most of the propagators of this interpretation are best described as social historians it is, however, surprising to see with what success they have managed to convince most of their colleagues in church history to accept their interpretation as the new orthodoxy.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the recent work by Susan Brigden, *London and the Reformation*, offers an excellent example of how what I would term the new socio-economic interpretation, namely that the initiatives for changes in poor relief came from civic government as a response to social and economic changes, has come to dominate this period's history. In spite of pointing to the significant creation of the five London hospitals of St Bartholomew's, Christ's, St Thomas's, Bethlem, and Bridewell as major charitable and protestant initiatives in the reign of Edward VI, and emphasizing that the 'increase in charitable giving coincided – exactly – with the advance of protestantism', Susan Brigden is still prepared to disregard her own evidence and to see the reforms as a consequence of an enormous rise in pauperism and interpret the changes as a response to 'a social necessity'.<sup>6</sup>

It seems to me that what we are confronted with may be a classic case of having thrown out the baby with the bath-water and that a dose of revisionism may be required before a historically adjusted picture of the social reforms of the sixteenth century, set in their proper social, political and, not least, religious context, can be reconstructed.

Lee Palmer Wandel's study of the poor in Zwingli's Zurich is making great strides in that direction, stressing that the reforms of poor relief in Zurich in the 1520s were much more than just anxious reactions by a nervous city council to the increase in the numbers of the poor. Instead, Wandel emphasizes how closely these reforms were bound up with Zwingli's reforms of religious life in the city. Furthermore, Palmer

<sup>3</sup> N. Z. Davis, 'Poor relief, humanism and heresy', republished in N. Z. Davis, *Society and culture in early modern France* (Stanford, 1975), pp. 17–64.

<sup>4</sup> See B. Pullan, *Rich and poor in Renaissance Venice* (Oxford, 1991); C. Lis and H. Soly (eds.), *Poverty and capitalism in pre-industrial Europe* (Hassocks, Sussex, 1979); and P. Slack, *Poverty and policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> A few dissenting voices have been heard, see H. J. Grimm, 'Luther's contributions to sixteenth-century organization of poor relief', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, vi (1970), 222–34 and C. Lindberg, "'There should be no beggars among christians": Karlstadt, Luther and the origins of protestant poor relief', *Church History*, XLVI, no. 3 (1977), 313–34. Both Grimm and Carter Lindberg, however, concentrate on Luther's influence and theological rationale for encouraging changes in poor relief.

<sup>6</sup> S. Brigden, *London and the Reformation* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 477, 481–2.

Wandel points not only to the religious commitment of the men in charge of the social reform programmes and the language in which these reforms were formulated as indicative of the importance of protestantism for shaping and initiating the reforms in Zurich, but points also to the significance of evangelical reform coinciding with social reforms in a number of cities such as Nuremberg, Strassburg, Basle and Geneva.

Concentrating on three works by Zwingli, all dealing with aspects of poverty, and published from spring 1524 to spring 1525, thus neatly framing the new Zurich poor law of 1525, Palmer Wandel offers a convincing interpretation of the rationale behind the social reforms in Zurich. Based on the texts and the illustrated title pages of these pamphlets, she demonstrates that care of the poor was a public communal issue for Zwingli. For him it was not enough that the wealth of the catholic church be turned away from its misuse; it was the obligation of a godly, reformed magistracy to make sure that it was used for the need of others. Thus, for Zwingli the refusal to pay tithes and rents which had hitherto gone to the catholic church was not only theft, but also a rejection of a deeper bond between a man and his neighbour. Such income and contributions were an impersonal and correct way of relieving the community's poor.

Elaborating Luther's reference to the involuntary, lay, poor as the 'living images of God' Zwingli pointed out that the poor were the proper objects for the charity of the Christian community, not as a focus for good works, which all the reformers rejected, but as one of the most effective counter-balances to human self-love. That the iconophobic Zwingli began describing the poor as 'living images of God' in both text and picture at a time when all traditional images had been removed from the churches in Zurich is hardly a coincidence. What had hitherto been spent on idolatry could now be properly spent on the poor!

Similarly, when comparing the pre-Reformation Zurich alms statute of 1520 with the poor law of 1525, Palmer Wandel draws attention to the fact that, where the former sought to determine in great detail what separated the deserving from the undeserving poor, the latter focused on the problem of administering to the poor, delineating those civic institutions which were to care for the poor within the reformed, Christian community. It is noteworthy, that the poor law of 1525 incorporated most of the definitions of the deserving and undeserving poor introduced in 1520, but that its emphasis was on care, not control.

For the reformers, Luther as much as Zwingli, the reform of poor relief was bound up with their attack on traditional catholic practices and forms of religious life. For them the important distinction was not between rich and poor, but between the voluntary and involuntary poor; the latter was a human invention, while the former was part of the natural world created by God. The reformers' rejection of the traditional catholic distinction between those in holy orders – the clerics – and those without – the lay majority, led, as we know, to significant, popular anti-clericalism, in particular, directed against the mendicant orders.

In this context it is worth remembering that the mendicant orders constituted the main challenge to the protestant reformers in most towns and cities, not least because of their vernacular preaching. Furthermore, the mendicants were the most prominent voluntary poor within the catholic church. Despite their direct involvement in almsgiving their prime objective was with saving souls and only as a direct consequence of that were they concerned with practical charity. In this respect the Observant movement changed nothing. It only emphasized once more the traditional catholic position, that a truly Christian existence was one led in poverty after the example of Christ, underlining the beneficence of such orders to lay Christians. The grand

monastical buildings of the mendicant orders which still exist in Western Europe serve to remind us that it continued to be the monks and friars who benefited from their charitable undertakings, primarily because of their spiritual services to the lay community, through prayers, vigils and masses for the dead. Considering that the Observant, mendicant orders were prevented from owning property and real estate, the monetary donations they received must have been considerable to erect such monumental buildings. Evidently, the prospects for the lay, involuntary poor must have been depressing when competing for public charity with these voluntary, ecclesiastical poor who had so much more to offer prospective donors.

The catholic church justified the existence of these orders and their activities by the doctrine of good works. Thus man's meritorious actions, channelled through the church contributed to his salvation. The reformers, however, rejected the doctrine of good works as a human invention by Rome, emphasizing the unique role of faith and grace in man's unmerited salvation. Despite that, the reward motive continued to play a part in early modern, protestant charity, as emphasized by a number of scholars.<sup>7</sup> Evidently religious practices did not change overnight at the Reformation, but the reward motive, apart from being in the strictest protestant sense, theologically unacceptable, came to be used differently by protestants. Where catholic charity was performed with the certainty of reward in the afterlife, being a claim already underwritten by the church, protestant donors could rely on no such guarantees and could only nurture a pious hope of reward.

Historians, however, have shown an unfortunate preoccupation with this doctrine. This in turn has served to limit the debate about the theological rationale behind the changes in poor relief to one, unduly narrow, aspect of Reformation theology.<sup>8</sup> The result has been that the inherent anti-clericalism of evangelical protestantism, prominently expressed in Luther's definition of the church as the 'Priesthood of all believers', has been neglected in this particular context. Denying that holy orders made someone a superior Christian and that the church possessed sole or privileged access to God and salvation, was a watershed.<sup>9</sup> It served to hand the church back to the laity by redefining it as incorporating the whole Christian community with no qualitative difference between clergy and laity. Furthermore, this process was enhanced by the rejection of celibacy as a particularly blessed state. It was no longer required by those who wanted to serve the church, instead marriage and the godly family became the cornerstone of church and community.

Protestant hostility to begging can, in my opinion, not be separated from the rejection of mendicacy, while to see a new work ethic, reinforced by protestantism, emerging in the prohibitions against begging, as is done by Jütte and others, such as Soly & Lis, is to reduce a complex issue to a single, long-term, dimension, namely discipline.<sup>10</sup> To see the reformers as extending discipline to all aspects of human life, as argued by Jütte or as wanting to monasticize society, as recently characterized by Brian Pullan,<sup>11</sup> seems to me to ignore the reformers' emphasis on care and respect for the

<sup>7</sup> See for instance B. Pullan, 'Catholics and the poor in early modern Europe', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Series, xxvi (1976), 21, and Brigden, *London*, p. 482.

<sup>8</sup> As pointed out by Pullan, 'Catholics and the poor', p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the implications of the doctrine of the 'Priesthood of all believers', see E. Cameron, *The European Reformation* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 148–51.

<sup>10</sup> R. Jütte, 'Poor relief and social discipline in sixteenth-century Europe', *European Studies*, xi (1981), 25–52, and Jütte, *Poverty and deviance*, especially, p. 198. Lis and Soly (eds.), *Poverty and capitalism in pre-industrial Europe*, especially, pp. 82–96.

<sup>11</sup> Jütte, 'Poor relief', p. 29.

involuntary poor, who for them represented the only natural recipients of love and charity within the Christian, protestant community. That the care and laicization the reformers worked for in the sixteenth century may have resulted in the discipline and control which accompanied the growing secularization which took place in the eighteenth century, should not cause us to forget this significant rationale behind the reforms of early modern poor relief. To write the Reformation and its emphasis on care out of this story puts us in danger of leaving out an important and constitutive aspect without which we cannot understand the social reforms of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.<sup>12</sup>

In spite of these shortcomings, for which he alone is not responsible, Robert Jütte has produced an extremely useful survey which will be essential reading for students of early modern social history for years to come. It brings together for the first time the latest results in social, economic and demographic history, emphasizing the two central points in the life cycle of poorer families, the arrival of children and old age, which more often than not brought them into the domain of poor relief. Like Sandra Cavallo in her article on poverty in Turin (in the volume edited by Stuart Woolf), Jütte points to the unusual structure of poor households in early modern Europe, being generally very small, and only rarely consisting of a complete nuclear family.

Both the work of Jütte and the volume edited by Stuart Woolf attempt to see history from below, to portray how the poor shaped their own world, including not only the smaller group of between 5 and 10% of the population whom Paul Slack has labelled the structural poor, but also the much larger group of between 20 and 30%, the cyclical poor, who were in need of only occasional assistance. As such, these works fall within an already well-established historiographical trend, but, as much research in this area has already demonstrated, the sources for this approach are few and far between. Unfortunately, nearly all the information we have about the poorer 50% of the population of early modern Europe comes from institutional records compiled directly or indirectly by, or for, local and central government. The bias and aim of such sources make such historical undertakings a difficult enterprise at the best of times. This dilemma is unfortunately not resolved by a deliberate reading of the sources in a 'non-institutional manner' as suggested by Stuart Woolf.<sup>13</sup> Dangerous pitfalls easily open up by such undertakings; can we, for example, be absolutely certain that the household-structure of poorer people was much weaker than wealthier families just because many of their members received poor relief on an individual basis? The fact that administrators of poor relief recognized the inability of poorer families to assist each other – family and employers were, after all, the recognized first port of call in many protestant church orders – may only mean that these families were seen to be too destitute to generate much mutual assistance in times of crisis and not that no nuclear family-structure prevailed.

As pointed out by Jütte, the recent interest of social historians in aspects of early modern poverty, such as deviance, marginalization and stigmatization, has its roots in the 1960s and development in the social sciences. Thus the idea of the 'stigma of poverty' was popularized by Ervine Goffmann, in *Stigma. Notes on the management of spoiled identity* (1963). That historians of the early modern period should have been attracted to such ideas cannot surprise, especially since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for the first time since the Black Death witnessed considerable demographic

<sup>12</sup> See my forthcoming, 'Religious and cultural background for the changes in health care and poor relief in early modern, northern Europe', in Grell et al. (eds.), *Health care provisions*.

<sup>13</sup> For this suggestion, see S. Woolf (ed.), *Domestic strategies*, p. 15.

growth, often accompanied by serious economic problems and social crises which led to a vast increase in the number of vagrants, the so-called masterless men, who were deeply feared by contemporaries. Undoubtedly as a consequence, a criminal stereotype developed which caused all poor travellers to be seen as dangerous criminals, as emphasized by Florike Egmond in her study of organized crime and marginal groups in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Holland, Zeeland and Brabant. Such an unnuanced differentiation, however, appears problematic for the sixteenth century, where Robert Jütte's distinction between different groups of travellers, such as 'fahrende Leute' (harmless) and vagrants (dangerous), rings true. Thus Jütte's observations are confirmed by the instructions included in Johannes Bugenhagen's church orders for Hamburg and Lübeck, where detailed guidance is provided for the assistance to be provided for poor and sick travellers. In this connection it is noteworthy that most vagrants were single, young males, exactly the group that is underrepresented in the listings of the resident, respectable poor.

Both Jütte and Egmond find the link between poverty and crime far from clear in early modern Europe. In emphasizing that the dependency was anything but simple and direct and that organized crime followed different and separate patterns from petty theft, they confirm the results already reached for England by J. M. Beattie and D. Hay.<sup>14</sup> However, where Jütte accepts the image of the eighteenth century as the age of banditry, a view that was originally launched by Olwen Hufton, Egmond convincingly argues that this interpretation may simply be a product of the more exhaustive information that is available for this period.

Whereas some aspects of early modern crime and deviance were specific to the Netherlands, such as the extreme decentralization of the law courts, which resulted in considerable regional differences in terminology, other aspects conform closely with the general European picture of the period. In the Netherlands, as well as in France and England, the major influences on the long-term development of early modern organized crime are to be found in the economic conditions and the incidence of warfare, even if yet another specific Dutch phenomenon, namely that of immigration, should be added.

The idea that a particular sub-culture of crime and poverty existed in early modern Europe is firmly rejected by both Egmond and Jütte, while both scholars reiterate Eric Hobsbawm's view, first expressed in 1969, that early modern rural bandits demonstrate a clear preference for border areas and inaccessible regions.

Apart from the work of Lee Palmer Wandel, the books by Robert Jütte, Florike Egmond and Stuart Woolf all demonstrate the continued dominance of a historiographic tradition which is firmly rooted in the 1960s. Their interpretation of early modern social history, the reforms of poor relief, poor houses, hospitals, and the law courts are characterized by the deep scepticism which the radical cultural climate of the 1960s generated towards such institutions. Consequently, they have come to be seen as agents of the state, created to repress deviance and to control and discipline an unruly population on behalf of the ruling elite. The influence of Michel Foucault's works, in particular *Madness and civilization*, *The birth of the clinic*, and *Discipline and punish*, first published in French during the 1960s and in English during the following decade, has been pervasive. Thus generalizations which are in effect built predominantly on research into French social institutions of the eighteenth and

<sup>14</sup> See J. M. Beattie, 'The pattern of crime in England, 1660–1800', *Past and Present*, LXII (1974), 47–95, and D. Hay, 'War, dearth and theft in the eighteenth century: the record of the English courts', *Past and Present*, xciv (1982), 117–60.

nineteenth centuries, have, in my opinion, been allowed unduly to influence the concerns and interpretations of early modern social history.

A renewed emphasis on care and the role of religion has been evident in a couple of recent monographs, in addition to the above-mentioned work by Lee Palmer Wandel. Thus, Colin Jones's book on the growth of charity and hospitals in post-tridentine France, published in 1989, points to the new 'charitable imperative' as brought about by the revival of counter-reformation catholicism.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, David Underdown has recently shown us in his splendid study of the town of Dorchester how the reform of poor relief and health care provisions in that particular English town depended totally on the godly reformation which took place between 1613 and 1642 under the guidance of the town's reformed minister, John White.<sup>16</sup> What is, in other words, urgently needed is a revisionist interpretation of the reforms of poor relief in sixteenth-century Europe which emphasizes the significance of the Reformation for bringing about these changes. Admittedly, many of the social reforms did not in the first instance originate from the protestant reformers themselves, but without the reformers and their call to religious reform the speed and range of the reforms of poor relief would have been unimaginable. Unless we realize that these reforms were part of the greater movement for religious reform, we shall continue to misinterpret them and to see them in an anachronistic and one-dimensional light.

THE WELLCOME UNIT FOR THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE      OLE PETER GRELL  
CAMBRIDGE

<sup>15</sup> C. Jones, *The charitable imperative: hospitals and nursing in ancien régime and revolutionary France* (London, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> D. Underdown, *Fire from heaven. Life in an English town in the seventeenth century* (London, 1992).