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**Article**

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## MISZELLEN

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THOMAS SOKOLL

## Poor Yield of a Rich Field: An Undeserving ‘History of Poverty’ in Early Modern Europe

**ABSTRACT:** The new *Routledge History of Poverty, c. 1450–1800* provides neither a ‘history’ nor a coherent concept of ‘poverty’ and rests on an inappropriate time scale. However, a closer discussion of these flaws enables a more consistent perspective, based on the idea that the interplay of ‘labour’ and ‘poverty’ (epitomized in the notion of the ‘labouring poor’) forms the crucial key to the understanding of the decisive long-term theme in the history of poverty and poor relief in Europe from 1350 to 1850. It was in the aftermath of the Black Death and again during the ‘crisis of pauperism’ in the early nineteenth century that the experience of severe crises of the labour market led to changes in poor law policy aimed at the combined social control of both ‘labourers’ and the ‘poor’.

*Keywords:* poverty, poor relief, welfare state

*JEL Codes:* H53, I32, J21, N33

If there is such a thing as a guarantee for convincing and reliable handbooks, it has always depended on their editors and publishers. An example that may spring to mind immediately, at any rate among readers of this journal (or at least the older ones among them), is the magnificent *Cambridge Economic History of Europe* (CEHE). Planned and edited by Michael Postan and published by Cambridge University Press (C. U. P.), it stands out to this day as the authoritative flagship of European economic (and social) history, unsurpassed in the unique way in which the systematic composition of an overwhelming mass of material is combined with the most penetrating conceptual synthesis.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It took nearly half a century to complete the CEHE (8 vols, 1941–1989). Its outstanding contributions, most of them genuine treasures of historical scholarship, include the comparative analysis of the rise of the medieval manor by Marc Bloch (his intellectual legacy, in vol. 1, 1941); the chapters on medieval agriculture in England and trade in northern Europe by Postan himself (in vol. 1, 2nd edn 1966; vol. 2, 1952); the survey of price movements in early modern Europe by Fernand Braudel und Frank Spooner (in vol. 3, 1967); and the long masterpiece on industrialization by David Landes (in vol. 6, 1965), later published in its own right (Landes 1969 – arguably still the best textbook on the economic history of Europe from 1750 to 1965). – As far as modern economic history is concerned (from 1700 to the present), C. U. P. has managed to issue what would seem to be a worthy (though considerably smaller) successor to the CEHE (Broadberry/O’Rourke 2010), and even launched a survey on a global scale (Broadberry/Fukao 2021). There is also a similar format for modern Britain (Floud/Humphries/Johnson 2014), with the previous edition (Floud/Johnson 2004) still worth consulting).

For a long time, the house of Routledge has also been one of those scholarly publishers we felt we could rely on almost in blind faith. Who would ever forget its legendary International Library of Sociology and Social Reconstruction, founded by Karl Mannheim, which also featured pathbreaking studies in social and economic history.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Routledge has started to attach its own name as a trademark to a new series of history books. Ranging somewhat below the level of heavy handbooks, *The Routledge Histories* claim no less than to offer ‘a series of landmark books [...] against which all future books on their subjects will be judged’. However, it is difficult to see how that bold claim could ever have guided *The Routledge History of Poverty, c. 1450–1800*, edited by David Hitchcock and Julia McClure. With this title, the publishers rather appear to have done themselves a formidable disservice, for there is hardly any collective volume devoted to the history of poverty in pre-industrial Europe which gives such a misleading picture of the current state of research in that wide field.<sup>3</sup>

### 1. Thematic diversity – strength or weakness?

This is not to say that nothing may be gained from the book. In fact, between them the eighteen chapters are stuffed with a whole array of empirical matter, although this is hardly surprising, given their enormous thematic, geographic and chronological range. Thus, we encounter, to name but a few examples, indigenous people in the Spanish colonial empire, victims of the plague in London and Florence, maimed veteran soldiers and indebted tradesmen in England, itinerant street sellers in Venice, or sick people drinking from the mineral waters at Bath; we visit hospitals and poorhouses in England, Portugal and Venice, along with workhouses in England, France and the Netherlands; we learn about the intricacies of the legal and fiscal definitions of labourers, debtors and paupers in the Ottoman Empire; we are shown pictures of beggars and street children by Rembrandt and Murillo; we are invited to wonder in what way the educational principles which Robert Owen pursued in his spinning mill at New Lanark might have been related to the moral philosophy of Adam Smith. Any expert reader interested in such specific topics covered in this volume may discover interesting details and gain new insights. Even cursory readers, or maybe those in particular, will welcome the excellent extensive index (10 pages) which enables both specific searching and random browsing. By contrast, the structure of the volume is of little help. The eighteen chapters are divided into four parts, of which only one (III Institutions) keeps to what it promises (hospitals, workhouses), whereas the others (I Structures, II Impacts, IV Connections) compete in a meaningless assignment of chapters that the Introduction fails to justify (such as vagrants in I; or images of poverty in II, why not in IV?). Unless the reader fancies getting confused, he or she should simply forget about the four parts.

2 Banks (1954); Cole (1955); Smelser (1959); Ossowski (1963). The publisher was then named Routledge & Kegan Paul.

3 London / New York: Routledge 2021, xxvii, 380 pp. (37 figures, 2 tables), pb. £ 42,99. The quotation is from the series announcement (p. ii), facing the title page.

## 2. Conceptual vagueness

However, the volume is not only lacking in substantive coherence but also, and this is far more disconcerting, in conceptual consistency. There is no general clarification whatsoever as to what concept of ‘poverty’ was (or might have been) chosen as a firm base on which to build *The Routledge History of Poverty*. The issue seems to have been left to the discretion of each author (which would explain the variety of choices across the volume). In their brief introduction, the editors are nevertheless bold enough to start from a negative demarcation, uttering their fiercest protest against the ‘monopoly’ of that purely ‘economic’ concept of poverty introduced by neoliberal ideological strategists of the UN, the IMF and the World Bank as a yardstick of capitalist development in order to obscure the real causes of global poverty today (pp. xvi–xviii).<sup>4</sup> This is an unhelpful straw man in more than one sense. Given the movement towards a pretty comprehensive understanding of poverty, which started long ago, and the continuous documentation of the respective data sets in various UN and World Bank reports (most of them freely accessible), this conspiracist accusation is hardly appropriate, even with respect to these contemporary institutions.<sup>5</sup> It is altogether irrelevant in relation to the historical study of poverty. No historian of poverty in pre-industrial Europe has ever been blinded by a narrow and purely economic definition of poverty. On the contrary, if there is a lowest common denominator on which all scholars who have worked in that field over the last decades would agree, despite all substantive, methodological or other differences between them, then it is that the historical investigation of poverty is bound to include (naturally, as it were) the question of the economic causes and consequences of poverty, and that this question can only be discussed properly within the wider social, political, legal, ideological, religious, cultural or otherwise relevant context.

In pursuing an integrated approach in that sense, scholars have also found that it is advisable to combine and bridge between two analytical perspectives, namely the consideration of the responses to poverty by contemporaries at the time (such as religious benevolence, social control or political repression) and the application of the insights, tools and methods of modern research into the economic, social and cultural dimensions of poverty today (such as the construction of poverty lines). Admittedly, the latter point is actually touched upon by the editors in the last section of their introduction (entitled ‘Towards a new definition of poverty’): ‘in this volume we define poverty as a range of dearths, absences and inequalities that deprive a human being of the essential ability to

- 4 When Guido Alfani argues along the same lines at the beginning of his discussion of the ‘economic history of poverty’ (chap. 2), he hardly improves their case, but only highlights the bizarre structure of the entire argument in that he falls below the standard of clarity set by his own work on long-term changes in the distribution of incomes and wealth (see, for example, Alfani 2021). But at least he backpedals in the empirical part of his chapter where he employs various economic definitions of poverty (households 25 % below median wealth; the propertyless; those exempted from taxes).
- 5 Hitchcock and McClure do actually mention the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) but only, paradoxically enough, to support their case against the ‘flattening of poverty to a matter of economics’ (p. xvii). The MPI, encompassing measures for the standard of living, education and health, was introduced in 2010 by the UN Development Programme, and the Human Development Index (HDI) was used in its *Human Development Report* since 1990 (the MPI was in itself adapted from the HDI). The World Bank’s yearly *World Development Report* was explicitly devoted to poverty (again, in a wide sense) in 1980, 1990 and 2000/2001.

live to their full social potential without assistance' (p. xxvi). While there is nothing wrong with this in principle, it is difficult to see why it is claimed to be new. In fact, it is essentially nothing other than the concept of poverty as 'relative deprivation' as introduced by Peter Townsend in his mammoth study *Poverty in the United Kingdom* in 1979, which soon established itself as a key concept in modern sociology and was also taken up by prudent historians of poverty.<sup>6</sup>

Neither the editors nor the other authors of the *Routledge History of Poverty* engage with modern sociological notions of poverty. Lacking a critical and theoretical perspective, the consequence seems to be a tendency to just follow the sources blindly. Anyone who might turn up as 'poor' in any historical record is claimed for the history of poverty. In this way, the term 'poverty' becomes almost meaningless. It is inflated to bizarre dimensions where it includes people who simply do not belong in the history of poverty on any reasonable count. Thus, to give but three examples, McClure includes all indigenous people in Latin America who feature as 'poor' in Spanish sources, whereas in fact this was only a metaphorical stereotype meant to dress up the colonial 'protection' of an innocent 'flock' of 'poor' subjects in Christian robe (chap. 2: Poverty and empire);<sup>7</sup> Tawny Paul justifies the inclusion of middle-class people faced with indebtedness (not just those who actually were in debt, but also those who *might* run into debt) with the argument that 'poverty reached through eighteenth-century society in the form of fear and a culture of insecurity' and praises this as a 'new avenue of enquiry within poverty studies' (chap. 6: Losing wealth, quote on p. 119); Amanda Herbert includes all sorts of 'lower-status people', 'needy people' and 'people in precarity' (whatever that means) who came to cure at spas like Bath or Tunbridge Wells and goes so far as to claim that the 'sick poor' all had 'free access' to curative amenities, whereas in fact she has no more evidence to support this expansive claim than a host of individual cases (chap. 17: Spas for the sick poor, quotes *passim*).<sup>8</sup>

Others again employ a concept of poverty that is far too narrow, in that they follow the panic horror vision of the 'sturdy beggar', 'vagrant' or 'vagabond' that was conjured up in contemporary sources and had such a profound influence on official poor law policy. This is perhaps most obvious in the contributions by Hitchcock (chap. 4: The vagrant poor) and Alannah Tomkins (chap. 12: Poverty and the workhouse). Mainly focused on England, but with a firm grip on several other (west

6 Townsend (1979), pp. 46–49, 248–262, 915f. It is still a standard reference in any major sociological textbook such as Giddens/Sutton (2021), pp. 484–492 (the same is true of German handbooks: e.g. Hauser (2008), p. 105; Groh-Samberg/Voges (2013), pp. 61–65). Historical studies drawing on Townsend and related works include Slack (1988), pp. 2–5.

7 According to McClure, the entire system of colonial exploitation of the Spanish crown needs to be regarded as 'politics of poverty'. The question may be allowed whether we may regard this as a crown jewel of 'postcolonial' understanding.

8 Most of her cases were to be found in printed collections and reports made by doctors or visitors (some relate to France and the Caribbean), others were unearthed from parish records. Abounding with lively and picturesque detail, her entire material certainly makes a good read (and offers linguistic joy about 'soul-gears' [soldiers] relieved at Buxton Wells, p. 335). Nevertheless, there is no clue whatsoever as to whether the cases she quotes are typical or exceptional. What is more, despite the impressive number of individual cases, as a sample all this is meaningless, since the order of magnitude remains unclear. We would want to know, for example, how the number of 'sick poor' cured at Bath over a certain period relates to the number of *all* patients in evidence. Needless to say, we will probably never be in a position to answer that, but then the point is, that apparently it never occurred to Herbert to raise these key questions about representativity and proportionality in the first place.

and central) European countries as well (whereas most other chapters are restricted to one or two countries), they both provide a depressingly vivid account of the notorious attempts at containing the 'scourge' of 'dangerous' poverty by the relentless persecution, punishment and imprisonment of the poor and at breaking their 'idleness' by forced labour in closed institutions. Yet in doing so, they both essentially only reproduce the *discourse* of deterrence and repression with which political authorities and social theoreticians were so obsessed from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century (Hitchcock emphatically refers to Foucault's 'great confinement', pp. 71, 75).<sup>9</sup> They are both mainly concerned with intentions but not with achievements, with ideas but not with administration, with mere plans of model institutions but not their actual operation, whereas research over the last decades has made abundantly clear that it is essential not to confuse theoretical claims with practical accomplishments. After all, we do know that in England, for example, vagrancy was *not* controlled let alone eradicated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but nevertheless turned into a marginal problem of social policy during the eighteenth century. Furthermore, it is known that the workhouses never made any profits, if their inmates were at all ever set on work – in fact, by the late eighteenth century most of them were mere poorhouses providing assistance, care and shelter for one or two dozen helpless creatures belonging to those social groups as the old and infirm, widows with children or orphans, whose claim to relief was never contested.<sup>10</sup>

- 9 Foucault (1965), chap. 2. Tomkins also refers to Foucault (p. 248). – It is good to see that historians still read (and approve of) Foucault, and against all fashionable ado about 'discourse analysis' in more recent scholarship it is good to remember that this early study of madness remains an unsurpassed masterpiece in the history of discourse, just as the thematically related work on the birth of the prison (Foucault 1977). However, discourse refers to the realm of theory and must not be mistaken for actual practice. For a classic example of historical correction of that mistake, see the devastating critique of Foucault's notion of the modern (Benthamite) prison regime by Ignatieff (1978).
- 10 The best account of English poor law policy from the early sixteenth to the late eighteenth century, with a sober assessment of the extent to which actual outcomes differed from intended aims, is still Slack (1988), esp. pp. 162–187, 188–204; (1995), esp. pp. 27–40. As far as vagrancy is concerned, Beier (1985) remains unsurpassed, and his point that it declined after 1660 (both as a phenomenon and as a social and political issue), not least because the settlement laws (1662, 1697) made the regulation of migration easier (pp. 171–175), has proved well-grounded. The counterarguments by Hitchcock (2016) miss the target, as he is mainly engaged with a 'culturalist' notion of vagrancy which is primarily based on literary evidence like 'rogue ballads' (increasingly popular after 1640, it is true, but then what about the possibility that the 'rogue' was so popular as a literary figure because he had ceased to be much of social menace?). The issue of workhouses is more complicated, since even after the initial sixteenth-century move towards institutional deterrence, punishment and exploitation had failed, there were still recurrent initiatives along those lines (mainly in larger towns) well into the eighteenth century (which also failed). – Fairness demands mentioning that Tomkins does take the latter point into consideration. In fact, she neatly shows, for example, that the notorious French *hospitiaux généraux* were mixed institutions meant to combine punishment (of beggars), work (of 'idle' people) and care (of infirm, elderly, orphans and the like) (pp. 239–242). Still, she does not address the question of the composition of the 'pauper host'. After all, in order to assess the significance of workhouses we need to know, for example, how many inmates were set to work as compared to those taken care of; or, more generally, how many people were put into workhouses as compared to those receiving outdoor relief.

### 3. Delusive time scale

However, it is no mere accident that Hitchcock and Tomkins do not really consider the question of whether the harsh letter of the poor law might have translated into less offensive measures in the actual administration of poor relief. Rather, this neglect is closely related to the fact that they completely ignore the early nineteenth century. The same is true for the other authors, apparently because they all accepted the time span of 1450 to 1800, which must have resulted from the conceptual flippancy on part of the editors. Quite obviously, these years are supposed to enclose the early modern period, though it is not clear why 1450 was chosen for the earlier date instead of 1500. Perhaps the idea was to avoid getting too close to the Reformation, in order to evade the old question of the impact of Protestantism on the reorganization of poor relief after 1520.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the intention, the result is fundamentally flawed. The benchmarks of 1450 and 1800 are not only irrelevant to the history of poverty in Europe, but must be rejected as absolutely untenable, because they exclude the most decisive moments in poor law policy between the later Middle Ages and the setup of the modern welfare state. We are talking about the turning points associated with the severe crises of the labour market after 1350 and before 1850.

For the sake of simplicity, let us stick to the English example in trying to explain the point as briefly as possible within the given space – not the worst example for that matter, given that England has remained the classical case for the historical analysis of the brutal oppression of the ‘labouring poor’ ever since the exposition of the issue by Marx.<sup>12</sup>

Twenty years ago, Steve Hindle, in a brilliant study on the politics of poor relief in rural counties and parishes in England between 1550 and 1750, argued that the Elizabethan poor law (1598/1601) resulted from a socio-political ‘discovery’, from the implicit acknowledgement that due to the gradual expansion of wage labour in all sectors of the economy there had emerged, alongside the two traditional groups of the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving poor’, a third group, the ‘labouring poor’. These were people who were able to work (unlike the deserving indigent) and willing to work (unlike the undeserving idlers), but unable to find (sufficient) employment, owing to distortions and imbalances of the labour market (that is, due to forces beyond their control) – which means that it was more and more recognised that they should be entitled to public assistance.<sup>13</sup> As a matter of fact, while attempts at the brutal repression of all ‘able-bodied’ paupers persisted throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there was also a strong counteractive trend of compassionate understanding for the ‘involuntary unemployed’ poor which eventually led to a major shift in

11 In fact, most contributors play down this point (if they mention it at all) in that they refer to the parallel movements in Protestant and Catholic towns and territories. This is even true of the masterly survey of poor law policy in the context of early-modern state building by Joanna Innes, arguably the best piece of the entire volume (chap. 1). In contrast to that ‘parallelist’ position, it is worth pointing out that Protestantism, with its relentless work ethic discarding *any* form of ‘idleness’ (including monastic poverty), imposed a new understanding of poverty which was first put into practice by Protestant authorities and adopted in the Catholic camp only somewhat later; see Lis/Soly (1982), pp. 82–96; Jütte (1994), pp. 100–125.

12 Marx (1887/1996), p. 8, ‘primitive accumulation’ (= chap. 24 in the German edition of 1890/1972), with a perceptive linguistic note on ‘labouring poor’, pp. 747 f., n. 2 (= Marx 1890/1972, p. 788, n. 248).

13 Hindle (2004), pp. 2, 22–26. He explicitly saw his work as a follow-up of the pioneering study by Slack (1988), who had concentrated on the higher echelons of national poor law policy and the initiatives of larger towns, whereas Hindle descended to the lowest level of individual rural communities.

welfare policy. By the early nineteenth century, the problem of poverty had turned from a matter of moral condemnation to a pressing issue of social policy. With the acknowledgement of the interrelationship between poverty, chronic underemployment and rising price levels, traditional charity and almsgiving gave way to modern measures such as wage subsidies, unemployment benefits and family allowances. Indeed, during its closing years from about 1780 to 1834, the Old Poor Law transformed into a system of public welfare provision which was more generous than anywhere else in Europe and which numerous scholars have come to regard as an antecedent of the modern welfare state.<sup>14</sup> That this system entailed a steep increase in poor relief expenditure which resulted in a deep crisis and the subsequent break-up of the Old Poor Law, and that New Poor Law of 1834 marked the brusque return to a cynical moral stance towards poverty and the threat of the workhouse, need not concern us here. The decisive point is that only this early-nineteenth-century ‘crisis of pauperism’ marks the ‘logical’ endpoint of the early-modern regime of poor relief, so that it is entirely misguided to construct an early-modern history of poverty that terminates in 1800. In the English case, the appropriate deadline would be 1834, in the European context even 1850 – classical works on pauperism like those by Wilhelm Abel have always made that point.<sup>15</sup>

It is even more abstruse to set 1450 as the point of entry. Earlier generations of historians would have chosen 1500. Indeed, in older works on the history of poverty and poor relief, firmly anchored in the history of ideas and sticking to the traditional boundary between medieval and modern history, the Reformation featured as an almost ‘natural’ turning point. Today, there is much to be said for 1350. The reason why was first spelt out in a systematic fashion by Otto Gerhard Oexle almost forty years ago, and his arguments have been further supported by subsequent research.<sup>16</sup> Just as the discovery of the ‘labouring poor’ was made in the context of the new orientation of social policy in response to the severe harvest failures in the closing years of the sixteenth century, so is the distinction between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving poor’ closely related to the traumatic experience of the Black Death of 1348–1350, in which England had lost more than a third of its population. In order to curtail the increase of labourers’ wages and their mobility, both of which had been the result of the drastic slumps of the labour market, the crown stipulated, in the famous *Ordinance of Labourers* of 1349, that all ‘free’ and ‘able-bodied’ labourers should be forced to work for any master at any price and that it should be unlawful to support any ‘sturdy beggar’ who ‘refused to labour’. Almsgiving should be restricted to indigent people who were unable to work. Again, the fact that this harsh course of repression soon proved impossible to maintain in practice (on the contrary: increasing

14 Challenging (and correcting) the traditional condemnation of the ‘allowance system’ in the Poor Law Report of 1834 and in the older literature, Mark Blaug was the first scholar to speak of a ‘welfare state in miniature’ (‘miniature’ because of the parochial basis of the poor law) (1963; 1964). From this revisionist stance, a huge stream of research has emerged which is still in full flow. Convenient summaries include Dauntton (1995), pp. 447–474; King (2000), pp. 48–76; Block/Somers (2014), pp. 124–143; Sokoll (2015), pp. 78–89. For a more sceptical view, with good counterarguments, see Thane (1996), pp. 31–37, but then the latest study of the ‘parish welfare state’ in England by Waddell (2021) suggests that the redistributive effect of the old poor law was even greater than previously thought.

15 Abel (1974), pp. 302–313, 397–399; (1978), pp. 241–257. The latter has been available in English for quite a while (Abel 1980) and yet it is not acknowledged in this volume. For a succinct summary of more recent research, see Sokoll (2009).

16 Oexle (1986), pp. 85–95. Hunecke (1983) had made the same point, looking back at 1350 from an early-modern perspective, pp. 491f., 507. For a concise round-up of subsequent research, see Sokoll (2020), pp. 468–470.



wages and falling wheat prices led to a profound rise in real wages up to about 1450/70), need not to concern us here.<sup>17</sup> The point is that the mutually exclusive cross-definition of labour and poverty, which was to determine the history of poverty and poor relief well into the nineteenth century, was not an early-modern characteristic, but derived from the later Middle Age, and not just in England, but all over Europe. In the pre-history of the modern welfare state across Europe, the time span between 1350 and 1850 marks a unified period, a discursive and social formation of the *longue durée* which rested on the idea of an integrated political regulation of the regimes of labour and poverty.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. Numbers wanting

There is a further reason why historians of early-modern poverty are well advised not to ignore the early nineteenth century. It is only from that point in time (and some isolated earlier dates) that we are able to consider the dimensions of poverty as well as the forms and the scope of poor relief in sound statistical terms. Needless to say, this is not the place to dwell on this at any length. But a brief consideration will certainly not go amiss and help us to understand that it is not least the noble reserve towards numbers which renders the picture of poverty as given in the *Routledge History of Poverty* so unbalanced and unsatisfactory. For the sake of simplicity, let us again stick to the English case and take a look at a few basic figures (Table 1).

Table 1: Poor relief in England and Wales, 1750–1850: Some basic parameters

	1750	1776	1802	1820	1850
Poor relief expenditure					
per head of population (£)	0.16	0.21	0.45	0.62	0.31
per recipient (£)			3.94		5.86
as proportion of GDP (%)	0.99	1.59	2.15	2.66	1.07
Poor relief recipients					
as proportion of population (%)			11.4		5.7
proportion in workhouses (%)			8.0		12.3

Sources Adapted or calculated from Lindert (1998), Table 2, pp. 113–115 (poor relief expenditure); Williams (1981), Tables 4.2 and 4.5, pp. 147–153, 156–166 (poor relief recipients).

With the extension of systematic social policy measures from about 1780, England had come to spend more than 2 per cent of its GDP on poor relief between 1800 and 1830. By today's standards, this may look rather meagre. But in historical terms, that level of poor relief expenditure was pretty

17 Dyer (1998), pp. 211–233; Campbell (2006), pp. 215–222. From a European perspective, there is again the classic account of the effect of the Black Death on the labour market by Abel (1978), pp. 51–75 (English edition: Abel 1980, pp. 42–68).

18 For a profound discussion of the issue and its implications from the same long-term perspective, see Castel (2000; English edition 2003).

high indeed. The peak at 2.66 per cent of GDP in 1820 lies more than two and a half times above the figure for 1750 and again that for 1850 (it would once more rise above the 1 per cent mark only after 1900), and throughout the period from 1750 and 1850 the English figure was probably always higher than in any other European country.<sup>19</sup> The value of these transfer incomes to the labouring poor was quite considerable, given that nearly every eighth person in England (11.4 per cent of the population) received poor relief in 1802, amounting to almost £4 on average, when the yearly wage of a farm labourer stood at about £15.<sup>20</sup> Another point worth mentioning is that only 8 per cent of all recipients were residing in workhouses,<sup>21</sup> whereas the overall majority benefitted from outdoor relief of various forms, ranging from casual support in cash (lump sums, doles, pensions) or kind (flour, bread) to more systematically administered services like family allowances of the Speenhamland type, wage subsidies and local make-work schemes (labour rate, roundsman system).<sup>22</sup>

While it would be mistaken to project these findings back to the earlier eighteenth century or even to earlier dates, it is still unfortunate that next to nothing of all this is to be found in the *Routledge History of Poverty*. And it seems rather idiosyncratic to make so much ado about the repression of vagrants, about bridewells and workhouses, but not even mentioning the famous Speenhamland scale of 1795, according to which the amount of poor relief for labouring families was linked to the price of wheat and the number of children.<sup>23</sup> In fact, as the example of Speenhamland illustrates, the transition from traditional charities and repressive poor laws to modern forms of social policy and public welfare provision was well under way in early modern Europe (even though the latter were eventually only achieved in the twentieth century). Certainly, the extent to which more generous (as opposed to repressive) approaches towards the labouring poor emerged differed between countries (as well as between regions within countries), and the entire issue of how to chart the early history of the modern welfare state, or its pre-history for that matter, remains a matter of debate. But then, this is precisely the current state of research regarding poverty and poor relief in Europe between the later Middle Ages and modern society.

- 19 Lindert (2004), pp. 7–9, 11–15, 45–48. Unfortunately, comparative data for other European countries are rather thin on the ground before 1820. Bavel/Rijpma (2016) have since revised the English figures (pp. 172–176) and provided extended comparative data for Italy, the Netherlands, and France (all restricted to poor relief expenditure as percentage of GDP, sadly without numbers of recipients). For the latest discussion of the English case, with an impressive new data set of annual poor relief expenditure for the entire period of the Old Poor Law (1600–1834), see Waddell (2021).
- 20 Broadberry et al. (2015), p. 311 (wage of farm labourer). Needless to say, the figure of 11.4 per cent paupers in the population, calculated from the official statistics, is a rather crude measure of poverty. For a more sophisticated approach, see *ibid.*, pp. 301–339, where a newly constructed poverty line, using ‘respectability’ consumption baskets, is discussed in conjunction with a fascinating analysis of long-term changes in the distribution of incomes between 1290 and 1801.
- 21 Even under the harsh ‘workhouse test’ regime of the New Poor Law, paupers on indoor relief (= in workhouses) remained in a minority, their proportion of all paupers (= poor relief recipients) never exceeding 16 per cent up to 1870 (Daunton 2007, pp. 524–532; Fraser 2017, p. 57).
- 22 Good overviews provided by Boyer (1990), pp. 9–50; King (2000), pp. 141–180. It should be noted that most research in this field has been concerned with the rural areas of southern England. But for an important attempt at correcting that perspective, see again King (2000), pp. 181–226 (north and west England), 254–269 (typology of welfare regions of England).
- 23 For a brilliant discussion of Speenhamland as an epitome of generous relief policies under the Old Poor Law, see Block/Somers (2003); and the enlarged version (Block/Somers 2014, pp. 114–149).

## 5. Coda

*The Routledge History of Poverty, c. 1450–1800* does not seem to know much about all of this. The benchmark years alone render it a historical aberration (and a publishing blunder). However, the title is also deceptive in substantive terms. This is decidedly not a ‘history of poverty’, but a loose collection of papers concerned with various aspects of the political, administrative and cultural history of poor relief and between them presenting pieces of historical matter all of which just happen to stem from somewhere in Europe between 1450 and 1800 (the book being restricted to Europe is no problem, but readers may justifiably expect this to be reflected in the title). The social history of poverty is largely missing, and the poor themselves are almost completely absent. When they turn up, it is mainly in the form of the pictures of the poor made by their better-off contemporaries (or with respect to the ‘representations’ of the poor, as most of the authors would have it). Yet modern research into the history of poverty has been concerned with the poor themselves for a long time. Over the last two or three decades it has even been engaged in the large-scale exploration of sources left by the poor in which they speak in their own voice – for English pauper letters, arguably the finest record of that type, we can even draw on genuine standard works.<sup>24</sup> But Hitchcock, McClure and their colleagues say next to nothing about all that. Is it only because they know too little about this avenue of research? Or is it because they do not like it? Be that as it may. Taking a broad look over the combined scholarly labour that has been devoted to the history of poverty in Europe between 1350 and 1850 for several decades, it is evident that this is indeed a very wide and still expanding field of research. Thus, it has to be said that there are few books that have brought in such a poor yield from that rich field as *The Routledge History of Poverty, c. 1450–1800*.

Meanwhile, it is comforting to see that Oxford University Press, the competing sister of the publisher mentioned at the beginning of this essay, has set a new mark on the wider field of the early modern history of Europe, with a major handbook carrying 1350 and 1750 as key dates. It remains to be seen whether other scholars (and publishers) will follow that example.<sup>25</sup>

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24 Three examples may suffice: Hitchcock/King/Sharpe (1997) for an early collection of influential articles; Sokoll (2001) for a seminal edition (with a manual of source criticism); King (2019) for a masterly synthesis.

25 Scott (2015). As a matter of fact, the example is less promising as one might expect as most of the featuring articles are only concerned with the period of 1500–1750 (the latter date was chosen to avoid overlap with the companion handbook of the ancient regime: Doyle 2012). Moreover, there are only a few scattered references to poverty and poor relief, but no discussion of that subject in its own right. The same is true of the even larger subject of the living and working conditions of the labouring classes.

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