

Article

Relief or Not Relief

— Poor Policies in British History —

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Abstracts

The problem of poverty was one of the most serious social problems in modern Britain. Various policies were adopted to it by the cities and the state. This article points out some features of the attempts made by the authorities, overlooking the history of poor problem and poor relief in Britain since the sixteenth century. And the principal arguments of this article will be focused on the allowance of outdoor relief and the denial of it in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

KEY WORDS: the poor, poor relief, workhouse, history, Britain, modern,

I

When looking back to British history, it is possible to say that there were some “swings” of the policy of the state and cities to the problem of the poor. Although the personal charity has so far been done in general in the Christendom, some measures against the problem as the public social policy become necessary when it cannot be coped with through individual charity. And both the state and cities of Britain greatly struggled with policies to the poor.¹⁾

1) As concerns the problem of the poor in modern Britain, see E. M. Leonard, *The Early History of English Poor Relief*, (1900), Frank Cass, repr., 1965; M. James, *Social Problems and Policy during the Puritan Revolution, 1640-1660*, London, 1930; W. K. Jordan, *The Charities of London 1480-1660*, (1960), Archon Books, repr., 1974; A. L. Beier, *Masterless Men*, Methuen, 1985; J. Pound, *Poverty and Vagrancy in Tudor England*, Longman, 1986; P. Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England*, Longman, 1988; F. Driver, *Power and pauperism, The workhouse system 1834-1884*,

One of the “swings” was the choice whether each parish should take the policy to the poor or the larger governmental unit, the cities, should mainly take it. Parish was a geographical unit in the Christendom, forming a community, and there were about 100 parishes in early modern London including large ones and smaller ones. Act of Congress such as the poor law was, of course, equally applied to any parish, but the actual enforcement of it was principally left to parish officers such as churchwardens and overseers of the poor. On the other hand, the attempt was repeated which dealt with the problem of the poor through large institutions like House of Correction, the origin of which being London Bridewell, and Workhouse. Those institutions exceeded the frame of parish. It is possible, therefore, to say that the poor policy in Britain swung between the pole which based on local parish and the other pole which based on the larger governmental unit exceeding local parish.

Another of the “swings” was the choice, particularly in the 18th and the 19th centuries, whether the authorities should aim at enriching the poor relief or cutting it. It seems that enriching the poor relief was promoted by the authorities, having feared the influence of the French Revolution, to conciliate the poor, although it would naturally result in rising of the poor rates. The increase of the poor rates was one of the difficult problems to be resolved about the poor policy, because it would cause the dissatisfaction of the middle classes which were the main burden bearers. Every city and parish wanted, therefore, to control the rising of the poor rates or to decrease them, even though the policy would lead to cutting the social welfare, in modern words. But it must have been very difficult to cut the welfare of the poor who had once experienced possessing the enriched relief. How did the British carry it out? This article will principally argue

Cambridge U. P., 1993; D. Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform in 19th Century Britain, 1834-1914*, Longman, 1998; S. Lloyd, *Charity and poverty in England, c. 1680-1820*, Manchester U. P., 2009.

the matters, but before that we need to describe a short and necessary outline of the history of poor problems and poor policies in Britain.

II

We could define the poor as those who cannot support themselves without some kind of relief. And we could also insist that the problem of the poor became getting serious since the 16th century not only in England but in whole Western Europe. The main cause of the situation lay in population growth and decline of real wages due to it. The population of England was 3,010,000 in 1550. And fifty years later, it increased by 37% to 4,110,000 in 1600. Another fifty years later, it increased by 27% to 5,230,000 in 1650²⁾. But because the productivity had not well grown equally to the population growth, prices including corn price soared, bringing inflation and decline of real wages. Moreover, England experienced severe economic depression after the middle of the 16th century.

Why did England suffer such a depression despite the fact that it had enjoyed remarkable economic prosperity in the first half of the 16th century? One of the answers lay in somewhat incredible cause of the prosperity. It has been claimed that the prosperity was brought by the degradation of coinage. The Court of England, having had trouble with paying off its debts, carried out the degradation of coinage, causing a sharp drop of English Pound in the exchange rate in Europe. Then, as the goods of England, especially woollen goods, could be purchased cheaper in the continent, the England's exports increased greatly. Because the woollen production was a primary industry in England in those days, the great prosperity came out. But it was not possible to continue forever to carry out the degradation, which brought heavy inflation to England. If the situation had lasted, it could have brought England's economy to ruin. It

2) A. L. Beier and R. Finlay, eds., *London 1500-1700, The making of the metropolis*, Longman, 1986, p.39.

was, therefore, necessary to reform, and Thomas Gresham put back the coinage to original. It should have been necessary reform to reconstruct the state economy, but the export decreased sharply at once and the economic depression began. And what was worse, the Antwerp market, which had been thought as crucial for the English economy, collapsed with the independence war of Holland. Thus England suffered chronic depression. The Elizabethan period in the second half of the 16th century, which has been called the golden age, was in fact the age of severe economic depression.

The large part of the labouring population in those days consisted of the young people such as apprentices and servants. Many of them would move from local villages to cities, especially to metropolitan London, looking for jobs. But even if having reached to London, they might have been not able to get jobs because of depression. Then not a few persons of them became vagrants and managed to live in London suburbs. They would pass through the gates of London Wall and live on begging in the City, or they would possibly live on making crimes like pickpockets. The authorities and residents of London, therefore, hated vagrants because they might be hurtful to order, and feared them because they might bring pest. And besides the problem of vagrants, the poor problems such as the increase of their number and the worsening situation of their poverty became more and more serious social problems. In most of the cities of England in the early modern period, about 5% people of the city total population were the poor who always received some kind of relief, and 20% were the potential poor who might possibly receive it. At the time of famine, including the middle of the 1590s, the problem got more aggravated. Various reforms were tried, therefore, about the poor policy. A series of laws about the poor which has been called Elizabethan poor laws was also one of such reforms.

Poor laws had two parts. The one contained prescriptions about relief for

3) P. Slack, *op. cit.*, p.72.

the impotent poor due to being aged, sick or handicapped. The other had prescriptions about punishment of vagrants, who were thought to be idle and not to have will to work despite being able-bodied. Poor laws were, therefore, not only for relief of the poor but also for oppression of them. Many of the vagrants in those days were single men of teen-ager or twenties and they were merely unemployed men in our eyes. It had been prescribed by law since the 14th century that every man who was able to work should be employed by a master, except the case where he could live on with his fortune. Any person who had no master was called a “masterless man”, being synonymous with vagrant. As the definition of vagrant did not contain roaming, anyone who could not get work and had no master was a vagrant. It seems that there were many persons who wanted to work but could not work due to no employments. We should think them, therefore, to be not “vagrant” but “unemployed”.

The authorities of cities and the state in those days, however, did not recognize them to be unemployed, but attributed the cause of poverty and vagrancy only to their “idleness”. They should have thought that the poor were so idle as to become poor and vagrant. Then the punishments of vagrants were prescribed in poor laws. And every time the poor law was revised, the severity of the punishment escalated. The punishments beginning from stocks or whipping proceeded to cutting ear, branding, and enslaving, even to hanging if being arrested three times.⁴⁾ The fact of having made such severe punishments of vagrants tells how the authorities feared them and regarded them to be dangerous. And the fact that the law was revised one after another tells how ineffective it was for reducing the number of vagrants. The general question whether or not the number of crime will decrease by making the criminal law severer is difficult to answer. But at least concerning the vagrant problem in England in early

4) G. Nicholls, *A History of English Poor Law*, Vol. 1, (1854), Frank Cass, repr., 1967; P. Slack, *The English Poor Law 1531-1782*, Macmillan, 1990.

modern times, the number of them was not reduced by making the law severer. On the contrary, their number kept increasing in fact. Because the cause of vagrancy lay in the contemporary social and economic situation, the depression, not in their idleness, it was natural that the number of vagrants would not decrease unless the depression would be overcome.

It was the poor law of 1576 that we could first find out the government's understanding that making poor laws severer was not effective and therefore carrying out alternative measures was necessary against vagrants. The content of the law included establishing houses of correction to confine vagrants and reforming their idleness by putting them to work.⁵⁾ This method had already been practiced in London in 1550s. And the first house of correction was Bridewell Hospital in London.⁶⁾ Bridewell was established as one of the reforms of the poor policy in London and it was operated by the City of London beyond the framework of parish. Because of the evaluation that Bridewell more or less succeeded in the vagrant policy, the intention of the law of 1576 was making the similar institution in all over England.

Although not only vagrants but also various offenders including harlots were actually taken to Bridewell, most of them were minor criminals or moral offenders like idleness, lewdness and so on. The original scheme of Bridewell aimed at housing them and putting them to work. But as those who were taken to it might be too many, the minority of them were actually housed and made to work. Many were released after having been whipped or only examined without any punishment. It is difficult to judge

5) 18 Eliz. I c.3; G. Nicholls, *op. cit.*, pp.167-168.

6) Concerning London Bridewell, see my books and articles written in Japanese, and my English articles, T. UHARA, "London Bridewell in the Early Elizabethan Period", *Journal of Baltic and Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 4, 1994; "Bridewell and People, Social Control in Early Modern London", *The Kyotogakuen University Review, Faculty of Business Administration*, vol.11, no.1, July 2001; "Vagrancy and Punishment, Social Policy in Early Modern London", *Journal of Baltic and Scandinavian Studies*, vol.11 · 12, 2002; "Morality and People, Social Control in Early Modern London", *The Kyotogakuen University Review, Faculty of Business Administration*, vol.18, no.1, November 2008. And see also, P. Griffiths, *Lost Londons, Change, Crime and Control in the Capital City, 1550-1660*, Cambridge UP., 2008.

whether or not Bridewell was successful, because some inmates were rehoused after release. But the evaluation of it in those days could be high. For houses of correction, being similar to Bridewell, were founded not only in England under the law mentioned above but also in all over Europe. At first, such institutions spread to Holland and from there to other European countries. It was tried to confine “idle” vagrants and so on, putting them to work, and to correct their idleness in those institutions. Various methods of reformation were devised, including one invented in Holland as following.⁷⁾ Each vagrant was to be confined in the basement where a lot of water would be poured after the confinement. The basement was equipped with a pump to discharge the water from there, which the vagrant had to use in order not to be drowned. They made the vagrant to do such simple work during all daytime and even for a week. Then the report was made that his idleness could be corrected, resulting in getting the high praise for the method in Europe in those days.

In the meantime, the Elizabethan period in the second half of the 16th century suffered very severe depression as above described. And it seems to have taken at least a hundred years that England overcame the depression which had begun at the middle of the century. How did England overcome the difficulties? There were two keys for the answer. One was so called venture business and the other was fashion. A lot of entrepreneurs developed various new projects in this period of depression in England.⁸⁾ For example, because the Antwerp market which had been crucial for the import and export of England collapsed, new companies were born which tried to import the former imported goods directly from the places of origin, or to make exploration of unknown routes and lands, and to

7) B. Geremek, *La potence ou la pitié*, Gallimard, 1987, p.278; J-P. Gutton, *La société et les pauvres en Europe, XVI^e-XVIII^e siècles*, P. U. F., 1974, p.135.

8) J. Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England*, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1978; see also M. Kawakita's books written in Japanese.

colonize. It is amazing to understand that what were undertaken in this period, including founding of East India Company, made the foundation of later British Empire. The other type of the new projects aimed at developing domestic production of the former imported goods. New industries and new markets were formed for the project. And new domestic production of foreign fashion goods was especially important among them. There were various fashion goods in those days, including ruffs and stockings. Although the foreign stockings, for example, had been made of silk originally and popular among the nobles, the domestic stockings were made of cheaper wool and could be purchased by the middle classes and even by the low classes. Then the fashion spread over them through such a new project. The ruffs which the upper classes would wear needed a lot of starch. The domestic production of the ruffs, therefore, promoted the development of the national starch industry. It is true that we could live even if we had no fashion goods. But these examples demonstrate that fashion goods would actually bring about economic development. It is, in the same meaning, a very significant fact that the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century began with a fashion good. The Industrial Revolution of Britain originated with the nationwide fashion of “calico”, which was cotton textile brought from India. The traders and craftsmen belonging to the British traditional woollen and silk industries, who got displeased with such “calico fever”, took various means to enact the law prohibiting the import of calico. But the fashion was stronger than the law. After all, the fashion resulted in the domestic production of the same cotton textile. And as the production couldn't catch up with the demands of cotton goods, the machine-made production took the place of handmade production. The Industrial Revolution arose, taking such a course. It is really significant that the Industrial Revolution started not from the traditional industries but from the new industry of cotton, bringing revolutionary changes to the world.

Being back to the period of economic depression from the middle of the

16th century, those who undertook new projects were the landlords called “gentry”. But among them, there were many second sons and third sons of the families who were not so rich. They employed the local poor in low wages at their new projects. This fact was to be considered as revolutionary. For the poor had been thought as idle and dangerous since the 16th century. It needed substantial change of the idea to dare to employ them. And in the background of this change there was an essential conversion of the view about the poor. In short, it was the birth of arguments on “the profitable employment of the poor” in the 17th century. The poor became recognized to be the existence which could make profit and bring about economical prosperity, if they were employed in low wages and put to work. Then the British society experienced to have a conversion from the 16th century’s view on the poor that regarded them as dangerous for order to the 17th century’s one that evaluated labour force lying idle in them for economy.⁹⁾ The poverty, however, didn’t disappear in the British society through such a conversion, but the problem of the poor continued to be a serious social problem.

III

The poor problems and policies took such historical process as above described in early modern Britain. When we turn our eyes to the poor policies after the 18th century, two key words appear. The one is the institution called “workhouse”, and the other is the system called “outdoor relief”.

The workhouse was often referred to in many pamphlets which were published principally in the second half of the 17th century arguing the poor problem. Basing on the above mentioned arguments of “the profitable employment of the poor”, those pamphlets claimed to employ the poor in

9) See my books in Japanese.

workhouses and put them to work, to make profit, and to increase the national wealth. The arguments of “the profitable employment of the poor” bore fruits in the arguments of founding workhouses. With the background of flourishing of the arguments on workhouse, a pioneering form of the workhouse was founded in London as early as the middle of the 17th century.¹⁰⁾ But it existed only temporarily. The first workhouse of Britain was Bristol workhouse, which was established by the union of 19 parishes of the entire city,¹¹⁾ and consisted of two facilities. The one was for women and the other was for old persons, boys, and infants. The able-bodied inmates were employed in the work of spinning, weaving and so on, inside the workhouse, and infants were sustained and educated. The attempt of Bristol workhouse, however, could not manage to bear profit by employing the poor. The economical operation of the institution resulted in failure. And the fact was more or less common to all later workhouses. But the workhouse was found incidentally to have another effect. The poor disliked to be housed in the workhouse. Therefore, the number of application for relief by the poor to the parish rapidly decreased. The workhouse had the effect of cutting the poor relief.

Being stimulated by the foundation of Bristol workhouse, the other cities also would begin to establish the workhouse. During 15 years after Bristol’s attempt,¹²⁾ 13 cities made the similar institution. London also rebuilt the workhouse in the late 17th century, which housed a hundred poor children, providing elementary education and vocational training, and moreover housed vagrants and beggars, putting them to work.¹³⁾ The workhouse was managed principally with the poor rates collected in each parish, and

10) V. Pearl, “Puritans and Poor Relief, The London Workhouse, 1649-1660”, in D. Pennington and K. Thomas, eds., *Puritans and Revolutionaries*, Oxford UP., 1978.

11) C. Lis and H. Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism in Pre-Industrial Europe*, Harvester Press, 1982, p.127.

12) S. and B. Webb, *English Poor Law History*, Part I, 1927, p.120.

13) S. Macfarlane, “Social policy and the poor in the later seventeenth century”, in A. L. Beier and R. Finlay, eds., *London 1500-1700*, Longman, 1986.

the profit raised from the work of inmates was only a little. Many workhouses were founded in London after the 1720s. Those attempts were the poor policies of the parishes, which suffered from the load of the heavy poor rates and tried to alleviate it with the workhouse. There existed 12 workhouses in London and Westminster by 1725.¹⁴⁾

The other key word was outdoor relief. It meant the poor relief outside of the workhouse, in other words, the system of relief of the poor at home. This system generally prevailed in Britain after the later 18th century. The concrete means of the outdoor relief contained pension, temporary relief, allowance to keep children, subsidy for wages as explained below, and so on. Each parish allowed such relief to its poor people and relieved them at home. The resources of the relief came chiefly from the poor rates.

The poor relief with the subsidy for wages was generally called the Speenhamland System.¹⁵⁾ This system prescribed the necessary amount of bread in a week as 3 gallons for men and 1.5 gallons for women and children, making it possible to calculate the minimum necessary sum of a family according to the price of bread and the number of the family members. And in case the wages of the family fell below the necessary sum, the shortage would be supplemented publicly. The resources of the subsidy were again to be raised from the poor rates. It seems that this system was realized widely between 1795 and 1833 in England and Wales.

The reason why this system widely prevailed might lie in the government's fear of revolts or disorder by the poor, due to the influence of the French Revolution or to famine caused by poor crops. The authorities might be conscious of the necessity of protecting the poor through admitting the outdoor relief. Otherwise the wealthy classes might promote the poor relief in order to satisfy themselves with the traditional paternalistic practice. Whatever the cause might be, however, the system

14) *An Account of several Work-Houses for Employing and Maintaining the Poor*, London, 1725, p.112.

15) G. Nicholls, *ibid.*, pp.131ff.; K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Beacon Press, 1957.

must have been beneficial to the poor. They would never starve to death as long as this Speenhamland System continued. For the minimum wages, being necessary to survive, were publicly secured.

However, what results did this system bring about? Because the labourer's wages would be supplemented by the subsidy even if the employer paid low wages, he desired to keep paying low wages. This system, therefore, meant the subsidy system for employers more than for labourers. As for labourers, moreover, they tended not to work, because they would get the subsidy more if their earnings became less. The results of the Speenhamland System were the prevalence of low wages and the declines of labourers' will to work, and the inevitable rising of the poor rates.

The results were ironical, because the subsidy system, having been adopted for the relief of the poor who could not live with their own wages, created a lot of idle labourers. It seems, therefore, to be natural that the criticism occurred to such actual state of the system. For example, Townsend insisted that hunger would become penalty for the poor to get diligent habitude, and Malthus criticised the poor laws, describing that poor relief would only increase the number of the poor by giving them temporary life and could not decrease their poverty.¹⁶⁾ Their arguments had influences on the later poor law amendment act.

But it was not easy to deprive the poor, who had once possessed the outdoor relief, of the benefit of it. To abolish the poor relief totally with drastic measures and to own no load of the poor rates was an impossible story. Then the key for the reform of the system was the workhouse. The poor laws were revised and the new one was enacted in 1834. The points of the new poor law were as follows.¹⁷⁾ A parish or the union of parishes

16) J. Townsend, *A Dissertation on the Poor Laws, by a Well-wisher to Mankind*, 1785; T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 1803.

17) 4 & 5 William IV, c.76; G. Nicholls, *ibid.*, pp.270ff. As concerns the workhouses after the new poor law, see N. Longmate, *The Workhouse*, Temple Smith, 1974; M. A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System, 1834-1929, the History of an English Social Institution*, The University of Georgia Press, 1981; P.

should found a workhouse with the resources of the poor rates and make the discipline in the workhouse very severe. The inmates of the workhouse should be compelled to obey so strict discipline that they could not endure the life inside the workhouse. But the able-bodied poor could not receive any relief outside it. The system giving subsidy for shortage of wages was to be substantially limited, and the allowance in kind might be supplied, if necessary. The impotent poor were to receive enough relief in the workhouse, but in fact they also should be compelled to obey the discipline as severe as the able-bodied poor should be.

It was a strange policy. For it made the particular institutions, workhouses, for the poor, but it made them so disgusting or terrible as no one wanted to enter. Then, it declared that poor relief would be received only in the institutions. It was not, therefore, the total abolition of poor relief. It provided relief, but it created the condition as no one wanted it. As mentioned above, workhouses had been known to have the effect of restraining the poor's application for relief since Bristol workhouse was founded. It took full use of the effect. This reform, a substantial cut in welfare in modern words, was executed with the measures as above. Consequently, there were movements of opposing the new poor law. And in fact it took a time more or less to abolish the outdoor relief. But after 1834, when the poor laws were revised, Britain would have no longer the society where starving to death never happened. And it was transformed into the society where the penalty of hunger could be generally imposed on those who would not work.

Wood, *Poverty and the Workhouse in Victorian Britain*, Alan Sutton, 1991; F. Driver, *op. cit.*; David Englander, *op. cit.*; K. Morrison, *The Workhouse, A Study of Poor-Law Buildings in England*, English Heritage at the National Monuments Record Centre, 1999.