

RICHARD HARVEY

RECENT RESEARCH ON POVERTY IN TUDOR-STUART ENGLAND: REVIEW AND COMMENTARY

Recent research on poverty in Tudor-Stuart England has produced no surprises, no controversies. The scene has been one of quiet industriousness.¹ Yet surely a stock-taking from time to time serves a useful purpose in any area of historical investigation. It clarifies. It offers an understanding of the current state of the question. It asks, what questions are now being posed? What interpretations are being advanced? What appears to be the most promising of the current areas of inquiry? This essay is a selective review of the fruits of recent research on the three questions which have particularly interested students of poverty in Tudor-Stuart England. Those questions are: 1) how were the poor defined?, 2) what was public policy toward them?, and 3) how did Englishmen themselves understand the problem of poverty?

I

First, how were the poor defined? The answer to that question depended on where it was asked, when it was asked, and the purpose served by the definition. If that purpose was the provision of regular outdoor or indoor relief by a public authority, then highly specific definitions and descriptions might be given. From the Norwich city census, for example:

Peter Browne, porter, a cobler of 50 yeris, hath lyttle worke, and Agnes, his wyfe, of 60 yeris, that worketh nott but have ben syk syns Christmas, but in helth she spyn white warpe; 3 daughters of 18, 16, of 14 yeris which all spyn

¹ Geoffrey W. Oxley's *Poor Relief in England and Wales, 1601-1834* (London, 1974), which examines the types of local evidence available to researchers; John Pound's *Poverty and Vagrancy in Tudor England* (London, 1971), which is an analysis with documents; and Leslie Clarkson's *Death, Disease and Famine in Pre-industrial England* (New York, 1975), which examines the factors affecting birth and death rates especially among the poor, are recent examples of that quiet industriousness. Each surveys some aspect of recent research.

when they can get yt, but nowe they are without worke. They have dwelt here above 20 yeris, and they have on daughter, Elizabeth, is idle and sent from cervis with William Naught of Thorp, wher she dwelt 3 quarters of a yer.²

And from a petition to Lancashire magistrates:

1689: Martha Cliffe of Windle Spinster for about twelve months since is become so melancholy unruly and hard to be governed that she is now a terrour to hir neighbours. They apprehending that she may wilfully distroy hirselfe, mayme their children burne their houses or do some other spoyle amongst them and haveing nothing in the world for hir substance or do keep guard upon her doe humbly pray that shee may be conveyed to the house of correction to bee kept at labour for hir liveing hopinge the same may be a fit meanes to reclaim [. . .].³

Such specifics abound in censuses (the “views” of the poor), records of the pensioned poor, petitions to the justices, and in lists of those in receipt of occasional, non-institutional relief.

Recent research has expanded our knowledge of those of the poor who came into relatively frequent touch with relief authorities. It has not deepened it. From a demographic perspective, however, the recipients of regular relief ought to be regarded as mere, but rather prosperous, islands in a sea of migrant, underemployed, and vagrant poor. Alan Everitt took one segment of the migrant poor, the farm laborers, as his subject in a recent essay. Everitt concluded:

As the period proceeded [. . .] a growing army of landless, or almost landless, labourers appeared, dependent on wages alone for their livelihood, often forced to wander from place to place till they found employment, or else to hire themselves out at the autumnal labour fairs held in many market towns. At the same time, largely because the development of commercial farming and the progress of regional specialization in agriculture greatly intensified the *demand* for seasonal or occasional labour, a new population of migrant labourers gradually came into being, principally recruited from among the ranks of these disinherited peasants.⁴

While the number of those receiving regular “pension” relief may have been relatively stable, the total number of the poor varied because that number could include migrant laborers whom dearths, trade depressions,

² The Norwich Census of the Poor, 1570, ed. by John F. Pound (Norwich, 1971), p. 23.

³ Alfred Fessler, “The Official Attitude toward the Sick Poor in Seventeenth Century Lancashire”, in: Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, CII (1952), p. 98.

⁴ Alan Everitt, “Farm Labourers”, in: The Agrarian History of England and Wales, IV: 1500-1640, ed. by Joan Thirsk (Cambridge, 1967), p. 399.

epidemics, and seasonal labor demand affected so directly. Thus, a definition of the poor must also include the man who could not find enough work to maintain himself and his family, in an environment of agricultural change and population increase.

A person without work and without settled residence could be one or the other: migrant (in search of work) or vagrant (threat to public order), depending on the vagaries of circumstance.⁵ Peter Clark found evidence in deposition records of “subsistence migration” in Kent, 1580-1640. The typical migrant in Kent seems to have been a single, male laborer, who bore little resemblance to the types depicted in the literature of roguery. Clark believes that the movement of large numbers of migrants into Canterbury, Maidstone and Faversham, 1580-1640, placed an impossible burden upon traditional charitableness: “The neighbourliness of almsgiving had to give way under immigrant pressure to the compulsory rate.”⁶

Beier’s article on vagrants and the social order in Elizabethan England, based on arrest records whose limitations he acknowledges, also finds the Harmanesque notion of migrants as vagrants dubious. However, he admits of the danger

of imposing clear-cut motives and aims upon people who probably had none; in portraying vagrants *either* as honest labouring folk seeking work *or* as hardened crooks avoiding it. Many vagrants probably fit both categories, pursuing different activities, some legal and some not, as opportunities presented themselves.⁷

His vagrants, predominantly single males, tended to drift south-eastwards, mainly in the summer months. Paul Slack admits that “only the simplest and broadest generalizations [on vagrancy] are possible”⁸ from his samples

⁵ See Past & Present, No 71 (1976), pp. 126-34, for a debate on the issue of the vagrant’s willingness to work by J. F. Pound and A. L. Beier.

⁶ Peter Clark, “The Migrant in Kentish Towns, 1580-1640”, in: *Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500-1700*, ed. by Peter Clark and Paul Slack (Toronto, 1972), p. 152. Clark’s evidence and tentative conclusions can be profitably compared to Olwen Hufton’s “Begging, Vagrancy, Vagabondage and the Law: an Aspect of the Problem of Poverty in Eighteenth-Century France”, in: *European Studies Review*, II (1972), pp. 97-123, and to Robert Wade, “A Culture of Poverty”, in: *Institute of Developmental Studies Bulletin* (University of Sussex, England), October 1973, pp. 4-30.

⁷ A. L. Beier, “Vagrants and the Social Order in Elizabethan England”, in: *Past & Present*, No 64 (1974), p. 14. Thomas Harman’s part-fictional, part-factual *A Caveat for Common Cursitors* (1566) viewed Elizabethan vagrants as wily petty criminals. The nomenclature he used to describe their social world was often uncritically invoked by later writers.

⁸ Paul A. Slack, “Vagrants and Vagrancy in England, 1598-1664”, in: *Economic History Review*, Second Series, XXVII (1974), p. 365.

of passport registers and municipal expulsion records from 1589 to 1664. Many must have been seeking work, and perhaps some found it; most were young single males who moved seasonally, and generally towards the south-east. “Those punished as vagabonds were a roughly identifiable sub-group among migrants, shading into categories of wanderers and paupers, but marked out at the extreme by an absence of complete families and a predominance of single men among them.”⁹

As opposed to Beier’s Elizabethan vagrants, Slack’s were long-term and long-distance migrants.

Edward Yovell, for example, a Londoner by birth, began wandering after ending his apprenticeship in Worcester. Twice in two years he took up casual work in London where he had friends, then helped with the harvest at his uncle’s in Surrey, next worked at various inns in Chichester, and finally returned to Worcester via Salisbury, Bristol, and Gloucester, presumably for the winter.¹⁰

Had economic conditions been adverse at the time that they entered the community, the former migrants at work in Norwich by 1570 would surely have been treated as vagrants. J. F. Pound writes:

in the ten years preceding the census a total of sixty-nine families, representing 299 people (or some 12½% of the total poor), had added to the numbers of the city’s poor. Most of these people had emigrated from the surrounding country districts, but thirty-six families, representing 129 people, had origins outside Norfolk. Of these 129, 47 came from relatively short distances (35 from Suffolk, 12 from Essex), 44 from the north of England (Yorkshire, Lancashire and unspecified northern areas) and one family each from the west country, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Cambridge and Northamptonshire. Most of these people were employed, or claimed to be employed [. . .].¹¹

The Ipswich register of the poor, 1569-83, lists a good many migrants, some of whom were accepted as pensioners, some sent on.¹²

The generalizations drawn thus far on migrant as vagrant research have been somewhat extravagant. Not only that, the fact that the evidence — whether court depositions, arrests, or passport registers — often only dimly illuminates the lives of only those who came into contact with authority,

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 368.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ John F. Pound, “An Elizabethan Census of the Poor: The Treatment of Vagrancy in Norwich, 1570-1580”, in: *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, VIII (1961-62), p. 139.

¹² John Webb, *Poor Relief in Elizabethan Ipswich* (Ipswich, 1966), pp. 78, 80, 81, 83, 85, 86, 89.

has been insufficiently emphasized.¹³ Yet in terms of who the poor were, this area of inquiry appears to be more promising than others.

How, when and where the poor were defined determined their numbers. According to Felix Hull, half of the parish of Heydon in North-West Essex was in need of relief from the 1560's to the 1630's. North-West Essex, generally, was an area in which 25-30% of manorial tenants were unable to support themselves on their holdings.¹⁴ In North-East Essex, during the period 1560-1640, "evidence points to a wage earning class largely divorced from the soil and relying entirely on the clothier for employment and livelihood, and on the exigencies of the nearest corn market for food."¹⁵ And in the period 1622-32 "Complaints of poverty in this region are so numerous that the student becomes suspicious of their validity."¹⁶ Hull found "slum poverty" in that part of the county adjacent to London, in East and West Ham, and Barking. In South and East Essex, poor seafaring folk bulked large among the contemporary poor,¹⁷ while for Central Essex, Hull estimated that 25% of tenants occupied holdings of less than 5 acres.¹⁸ Thus, in Essex, 1540-1640, Hull found at least four distinct economic regions, four distinct types of poor, with their numbers, exclusive of vagrants, varying between 25% to over 50%.

At Norwich in 1570, according to Pound, about 22% of the total population of about 10,000 was regarded by the census-takers as the city poor. However, only about 5% of the population was receiving regular assistance from the city at the time of the census.¹⁹ At Warwick, in the 1570's and 1580's, the decade or so after the Norwich census was taken, Beier's evidence indicates that about 30% of the Warwick population was poor, by

¹³ See John Patten, *Rural-Urban Migration in Pre-Industrial England* [Research Papers, School of Geography, Oxford University, No 6] (Oxford, 1973), who reviews recent research on the subject and, in passing, presents an excellent critique of the relative value of the types of evidence available for migration studies: freeman records, apprentice indentures, wills, settlement records and depositions. For additional data on vagrants see Paul Slack, "Poverty and Politics in Salisbury, 1597-1666", in: *Crisis and Order*, op. cit., pp. 166ff.; J. W. F. Hill, *Tudor and Stuart Lincoln* (Cambridge, 1956), p. 38; Robert C. Johnson, "The Transportation of Vagrant Children, 1618-1622", in: *Early Stuart Studies: Essays in Honor of David Harris Willson*, ed. by Howard S. Reinmuth (Minneapolis, 1970), pp. 137-51; W. G. Howson, "Plague, Poverty, and Population in parts of Northwest England, 1580-1720", in: *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, CXII (1961), pp. 49-55.

¹⁴ Felix Hull, "Agriculture and Rural Society in Essex, 1540-1640" (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, London University, 1950), p. 471.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 480.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 473.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Pound, "An Elizabethan Census", loc. cit., pp. 144ff.

contemporary standards and judgements.²⁰ A 1625 census in Salisbury revealed about 4% of its population in receipt of alms.²¹ One year later, a contemporary estimated that the poor of Salisbury numbered 3,000 of its 6,500 population, which estimate Slack says was “doubtless exaggerated.”²² In yet another census, undated, which Slack places at about 1635, the percentage of those receiving alms in only three, not all, of Salisbury’s parishes was again about 5%,²³ which is roughly the same percentage found for Exeter, Lyon and Norwich.²⁴

In Kent in the 1660’s, Chalklin found that the percentage of the population exempted from the hearth tax varied from 26% to 51%.²⁵ L. A. Clarkson says that the national variation was between 5% and 50% exempted.²⁶ Joyce Godber concluded that in 1671 the percentage of those thought to be too poor to pay the hearth tax in three Bedfordshire parishes ranged from only 11% to 19%.²⁷ Newcastle’s 41% exempted from the 1665 hearth tax is close to the figure for Exeter, about 40%, but a good deal higher than that for York in 1672, 20%, and for Leicester in 1670, 27%.²⁸

Beier found evidence on the extent of poverty in two rural parishes in Warwickshire, Fillongley and Kenilworth Augmentation. Both were in the same economic region of the county, and they were of similar size. Yet, in 1670, of Kenilworth Augmentation’s population, 80% were poor, of Fillongley’s, 57%.²⁹ Beier conjectured that the migrant poor found Kenilworth Augmentation more attractive. Lists compiled for Lichfield in 1695 indicate that those labelled paupers comprised about 5% of the population.³⁰ W. K. Jordan offers this generalization: “an extensive study

²⁰ A. L. Beier, “Studies in Poverty and Poor Relief in Warwickshire, 1540-1680” (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1969), p. 54.

²¹ Slack, “Poverty and Politics in Salisbury”, loc. cit., p. 166.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 173-76.

²⁴ Wallace T. MacCaffrey, *Exeter 1540-1640: The Growth of an English County Town* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), pp. 12, 113; Natalie Z. Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975), pp. 63-64.

²⁵ C. W. Chalklin, *Seventeenth Century Kent: A Social and Economic History* (London, 1965), pp. 255, 261.

²⁶ L. A. Clarkson, *The Pre-Industrial Economy in England, 1500-1750* (London, 1971), p. 233.

²⁷ Joyce Godber, *History of Bedfordshire, 1066-1888* (Bedford, 1969), p. 278.

²⁸ Roger Howell, Jr, *Newcastle Upon Tyne and the Puritan Revolution* (Oxford, 1967), pp. 9-10. On another reckoning, pp. 12-13, Howell estimates the Newcastle poor to have been 76% of the town’s 13,000 population.

²⁹ Beier, “Poverty and Poor Relief in Warwickshire”, op. cit., pp. 210-12.

³⁰ D. C. Coleman, “Labour in the English Economy of the Seventeenth Century”, in: *Seventeenth Century England: Society in an Age of Revolution*, ed. by Paul S. Seaver (New York, 1976), p. 119.

of parochial records for the certainly critical period 1601-1640” revealed that 8% of the urban population was chronically poor, “while in periods of trade depression or pestilence this proportion could rise, and that very quickly, to as much as 20 per cent of the population”.³¹

What is one to make of these numbers? They certainly bring into splendid relief what some regard as the bane of recent research on poverty, i.e. the significance of the local perspective over that of central government. Local definitions of poverty varied enormously. There was wide variation in the number of poor from parish to parish and from ward to ward within the same city (7% to 41% in Norwich wards in 1570, with the poorest wards there, as in Newcastle, being on the outskirts);³² and variation in number between those in regular receipt of alms and those receiving occasional “outdoor” relief. Censuses might define the poor as families, as heads of households, or as individuals. Or, from another perspective,

A census concentrating on those receiving relief would include a high proportion of elderly people, and a large number of households with widowed or unmarried heads, usually women. But a more comprehensive survey, including “honest labourers and poor householders” as well as the exceptional cases of the very poor, would contain more people of middle age and more married couples.³³

Variation is apparent also between the numbers of “impotent poor” and those, say migrant laborers, relieved in plague or trade depression periods; and variation too from period to period and region to region. Finally, one can surmise that a significant variation existed between the numbers in the categories named and the unofficial poor who received unrecorded, private relief.

Given these difficulties, do such numbers have any special utility in poverty research? Probably not. “Absolute” numbers derived from the study of single parishes are not particularly useful, even when those studies extend over a period of time. It may be suggested that research on comparisons between parishes, between regions, between England and developing countries today would be more rewarding. Again, too often numbers have been shorn of their context. That is, we have not had enough research on how specific local definitions of poverty came into being. The relation between national guidelines and local practicalities; the pressure of the migrant poor; the extent of local resources; and the dynamics

³¹ W. K. Jordan, *Philanthropy in England 1480-1660* (London, 1959), p. 68.

³² *The Norwich Census*, op. cit., Appendix IX, p. 101; Howell, *Newcastle and the Puritan Revolution*, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

³³ Slack, “Poverty and Politics in Salisbury”, p. 176.

of local politics were four of several determinants of local definitions and local policies. What mattered were the partly empirical, partly impressionistic perceptions of innumerate non-poor contemporaries – Members of Parliament, privy councillors, justices, overseers, constables, citizens. All agreed that the number of the poor had increased, was increasing, and ought to be diminished.

II

We can now turn to the question of what light recent research has cast on the public policies which were thought appropriate for the poor. In the main, that research has concentrated on four areas: on the making of poor-relief legislation; on the variety of relief provided by local authorities; on the significance of Puritanism for poor relief; and on Restoration relief, including the significance of its acts of settlement.

We may begin our discussion with a recent article by Neil Kunze on the poor law of 1536.³⁴ According to Kunze, the 1536 act is notable not for what it included – emphasis on the parish, regular relief collections, and so on –, but for what it left out. What it omitted was the provision of work for the able-bodied, in spite of the fact that its preamble adverts on the failure of the 1531 act to do so, and in spite of the fact that in draft form the 1536 statute bore such a provision. Kunze conjectures that that provision was excised by Parliament, not by the Government, as Elton had suggested.³⁵ The question raised in C. S. L. Davies's article is not why vagrants were treated harshly in the act of 1547, but rather why slavery, in particular, was imposed as a punishment.³⁶ The answer: MPs reacted to the hordes of migrants driven onto the roads by the bad harvest of 1545-46.

Recent research on rural and urban poor relief has added greatly to the store of information on the subject. As in several other areas of research on poverty, here too the kinship between the local historian and the historian of poverty is evident. Local historians have been especially industrious on the question of poor relief. We now know a good deal more about the variety of means employed to assist the poor: the pensions,³⁷ the public housing,³⁸ the municipal almshouses (for example, "Joane Pode, wydowe,

³⁴ Neil L. Kunze, "The Origins of Modern Social Legislation: The Henrician Poor Law of 1536", in: *Albion*, III (1971), pp. 9-20.

³⁵ G. R. Elton, "An Early Tudor Poor Law", in: *Economic History Review*, Second Series, VI (1953-54), pp. 55-67.

³⁶ C. S. L. Davies, "Slavery and Protector Somerset: the Vagrancy Act of 1547", *ibid.*, XIX (1966), pp. 533-49.

³⁷ F. G. Emmison, "The Care of the Poor in Elizabethan Essex: Recently Discovered Records", in: *Essex Review: a County Record*, LXII (1953), pp. 7-28.

of the age of 70, admytted into the Hospitall and there placed with Mother Willson, the 18 of Februarij anno 1582 [1583], by the will of Mr. Smarte. The woman verrye poore, having not besydes her aparrell not all worthe xijd. God hellpe her.”);³⁹ the county hospitals;⁴⁰ schemes for setting the poor on work;⁴¹ in-kind relief (clothing, wooden legs, fuel, “a couple of cows”);⁴² medical care;⁴³ and apprenticeships, burials and handouts.⁴⁴ Conversely, the well-known resistance to the relief and settlement of strangers has been amply confirmed.

Judging from Paul Slack’s study, Salisbury’s experience with the poor, 1597-1666, was unremarkable.⁴⁵ As the demands of the poor, both indigenous and migrant, increased with their numbers, the city adapted: by broadening its taxonomy of the poor; by providing additional relief — a city workhouse, a municipal brewhouse (a portion of whose profits were to go to relief), and a municipal storehouse —; and by accepting Puritan governance. Opposition from vested economic interests (the brewers, e.g.), and opposition to Puritan ideology gave the quietus to that short-lived experiment of the 1630’s and 1640’s.

Poor relief from the point of view of Stuart justices has been the subject of recent studies by T. G. Barnes,⁴⁶ J. S. Morrill⁴⁷ and A. L. Beier,⁴⁸ for Somersetshire (1625-40), Cheshire (1630-60) and Warwickshire (1625-80), respectively. According to those historians, Puritan JPs were not repressive toward the poor in Cheshire and Warwickshire. They maintained high standards of law enforcement (which could and did mean responsiveness to the poor’s needs, excepting provision of work for the able-bodied) in Cheshire and Warwickshire, as they did in Somersetshire, during the personal rule.

³⁸ A. F. Allen, “An Early Poor Law Account”, in: *Archaeologia Cantiana*, LXIV (1951), pp. 74-84.

³⁹ Webb, *Poor Relief in Elizabethan Ipswich*, op. cit., p. 94.

⁴⁰ Felix Hull, “The Spittlehouse of Key Street”, in: *Archaeologia Cantiana*, LXXXII (1967), pp. 179-83.

⁴¹ Hill, *Tudor and Stuart Lincoln*, op. cit., pp. 67, 92, 135.

⁴² Godber, *History of Bedfordshire*, op. cit., p. 221.

⁴³ Fessler, “The Official Attitude toward the Sick Poor”, loc. cit., pp. 85-113.

⁴⁴ I. F. Jones, “Aspects of Poor Law Administration, Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries, from Trull [Somersetshire] Overseers’ Accounts”, in: *Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, Proceedings*, XCV (1951), pp. 72-105.

⁴⁵ Slack, “Poverty and Politics in Salisbury”, pp. 164-203.

⁴⁶ Thomas Garden Barnes, *Somerset, 1625-1640: A County’s Government during the “Personal Rule”* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961).

⁴⁷ J. S. Morrill, *Cheshire 1630-1660: County Government and Society during the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1974).

⁴⁸ Beier, “Poverty and Poor Relief in Warwickshire”; id., “Poor Relief in Warwickshire 1630-1660”, in: *Past & Present*, No 35 (1966), pp. 77-100.

Ramshackle though the relief system was in Norfolk, 1660-1760, with its overburdened JPs – whose conscientiousness was subject to a number of variables –, the county appears to have maintained minimal standards.⁴⁹ The act of settlement of 1662, amended in 1685 and 1692, gave statutory status to the long-standing practice of barring strangers from becoming a charge on the parish rates. P. H. Styles's research on Warwickshire evidence indicates that mobility and resettlement were less restrictive than the act intended.⁵⁰

Such are the contributions of recent, rather narrowly focussed, research. Perhaps future historians of public policy will expand the range of questions thought worthy of investigation to include the following. One, was the attenuation of family responsibility for the care of its own impotent kin an influence on the development of a public relief system in Tudor England? W. G. Hoskins has written:

Most such [Tudor-village] poverty, especially that arising from old age and infirmity, was relieved within the family [. . .]: as witness the provision made by medieval peasants for their dependants – aged parents or unmarried sisters – and by the Tudor peasant also, where many a modest inventory of a yeoman or his widow discloses that the old man or old woman had “his parlour” or “her parlour” in the house; and here they rested in quiet among a few possessions while the rest of the ancestral house was given up to a son and his wife and the clamour of another infant generation.⁵¹

Rather than moralize on the virtual collapse of that traditional family responsibility, historians should probably look to such economic causes as rural poverty and migration from the land which made support of indigent relatives difficult or impossible. Two, what effect did the state-ordered substitution of poor rates for direct alms have on the Englishman's sense of brotherhood and charitableness? A. W. Coats mentions the possibility that it weakened the age's intricate code of subordination in that each face-to-face alms-giving transaction reinforced deference and inferiority afresh while the act of paying poor rates, in shifting the transaction to rate-payer and magistrate, lacked that function altogether.⁵² However, perhaps the more important cause-effect dynamic was *from* a decrease or selective

⁴⁹ Curtis H. Dittbrenner, “Poor Law and Poverty in Norwich and Norfolk, 1660-1760” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1973).

⁵⁰ P. H. Styles, “The Evolution of the Law of Settlement”, in: *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, IX (1963), pp. 33-63.

⁵¹ W. G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant: The Economic and Social History of a Leicestershire Village* (London, 1957), p. 189.

⁵² A. W. Coats, “The Relief of Poverty, Attitudes to Labour, and Economic Change in England, 1660-1782”, in: *International Review of Social History*, XXI (1976), p. 104.

expression of charitableness *to* a mandatory system, not, that is, *from* the mandatory *to* an atrophying of the charitable impulse. But since the two causal dynamics are not mutually exclusive, to insist on one or the other would be reductionist.

A third question which future historians of public policy may want to consider is whether historians can — i.e., is enough evidence available? — or should — i.e., does it lead unavoidably to the making of moral judgements? — evaluate the adequacy of public relief policy toward the poor in the Tudor-Stuart era. If such evaluations are made, they would not be without precedent. Professor Willcox concluded: “So long as the poor [of Gloucestershire] were not unruly or too expensive, their neighbors bothered with little more than the perfunctory attempt to keep them alive.”⁵³ On the other hand, W. K. Jordan recently sounded a warning against moralistic public relief history: “The whole subject of poverty in the early modern period has been too often treated with what can only be described as sentimentality, whether we are moved by the warm eloquence of a Latimer or some historian of our own age.”⁵⁴ In large part, of course, prevailing moral-intellectual preoccupations determine whether or how evaluations are made. At the moment, for example, the frequently invoked concept of pre-industrial or traditional society emphasizes a specific “structural” context of poverty — low demand, low productivity, low capital investment, primitive technology, working-class indiscipline, and the like — which appears to offer little moralistic scope to those of athletic social conscience. Nevertheless, each historian of public policy must deal with the question of adequacy for himself.

III

The final question to which recent historians have directed their research is how contemporaries themselves regarded poverty. Paul Fideler’s article in *Societas* is a plea for the recognition of the specific influence of Christian Humanism on poor-relief legislation in the 1530’s.⁵⁵ His analysis of the 1535 draft and the 1536 statute led him to conclude that the Christian Humanist program was concretely significant in both. Elton, on the other hand, had found the humanist-reform perspective diffuse and unspecific

⁵³ William B. Willcox, *Gloucestershire: A Study in Local Government, 1590-1640* (New Haven, 1940), p. 266.

⁵⁴ Jordan, *Philanthropy in England*, op. cit., p. 76.

⁵⁵ Paul A. Fideler, “Christian Humanism and poor law reform in early Tudor England”, in: *Societas: A Review of Social History*, IV (1974), pp. 269-85.

among the members of Cromwell's circle in the 1530's.⁵⁶ "Discussions of Poverty in Sixteenth Century England" is the title of Fideler's 1971 dissertation.⁵⁷ Fideler found that those discussions fell into three categories: theological, humanist and secular. When the medieval theological perspective on poverty became Protestantized, it placed greater emphasis on the need for the poor to trust in God, to be subservient, and to be content in their calling. On the other side, it approved of moderate prosperousness, enjoined charity, and stressed the stewardship of wealth. For the humanists, a more equitable distribution of wealth was a pre-condition of a more virtuous society. Humanists sought industriousness, which would preclude both idleness and rebellion, and a society whose solicitude for the poor was a disciplined one, i.e. which did not romanticize poverty (and especially vagrancy), and which found work for the able-bodied jobless. The secular and statist perspective tended toward repression, since for it poverty stood in a cause-effect relationship to insubordination. Different though those three categories of discussion were, they shared medieval and Tudor assumptions on the well-ordered society.

Divisions within the House of Commons, and mistrust between that House and the lesser magistracy charged with enforcing parliamentary enactments, were seen by Joan Ruth Kent, in her dissertation of 1971, "The Social Attitudes of Members of Parliament, 1590-1624", to have affected legislation on poverty.⁵⁸ Perhaps the sharpest division within the House was between the relative places of husbandry and industry in the economy, as they related to poverty. Some said that if agriculture were given priority and the rate of enclosures and depopulation diminished, the poor would have rural work and thus have no need to migrate to the towns and cities. Advocates of industry believed that it could generate work for the poor. Both sides censured magistrates for their apparent failure to enforce the laws on the poor, especially the vagrancy statutes. Some attributed the lesser magistrates' delinquency to their mean social class, which inclined them to sympathy with the poor. Those attitudes, plus the Members' stereotyped images of the poor, colored the debates and final action on the numerous bills relative to poverty — on houses of correction, on hospitals, on workhouses, on schemes for employing the poor — which the Parliaments of 1590-1624 saw introduced for action.

⁵⁶ Elton, "An Early Tudor Poor Law", loc. cit.

⁵⁷ Paul A. Fideler, "Discussions of Poverty in Sixteenth Century England" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1971).

⁵⁸ Joan Ruth Kent, "The Social Attitudes of Members of Parliament, 1590-1624" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of London, 1971).

Commentary and attitudes have also been studied by Christopher Hill and W. K. Jordan.⁵⁹ Hill finds perceptions of and policies on the poor, almsgiving, vagrancy, and laborers becoming more callous as a function of inter-related changes in the economy and religious ideology and, more particularly, as a function of the affinity between capitalism and Puritanism. V. G. Kiernan and T. H. Breen, among others, demur from that reading of the evidence. Jordan's study of commentary on poverty appears as a section in his *Philanthropy in England, 1480-1660*. The poor — shameful to Christian society as beggars and needful of discipline and education as able-bodied — preoccupied the Edwardian reformers in their partly religious, partly secular critiques. That the non-poor should be discriminately charitable; that the wealthy should be stewards of their wealth; that poverty should be diminished were accepted as self-evident truths by the moralists of the day. Elizabethan commentators emphasized additional themes in sermons and tracts: the covetousness of the day, and the need to put the able-bodied on work.⁶⁰ In the cumulative process of defining and prescribing for the poor, 1600-40, Puritans developed two particular themes: poverty as neither more nor less virtuous than any other state, and charitableness as an aspect of the Protestant doctrine of good works, i.e. as an expression of one's faith, not as a means to salvation. The 1640's and 1650's saw the projectors add diverse schemes for employing the poor to commentary literature. Jordan identified the Tudor Edwardian period as seminal in attitudes toward the poor. Charles Wilson identified a single year, 1649, as similarly seminal for the century following, especially on the subjects of employment, labor and the poor.

D. C. Coleman and Wilson have re-opened the question of Mercantilism's attitude toward the poor.⁶¹ According to Coleman, from the mid seventeenth century on, mercantilists commented frequently on the need to employ the poor. What Coleman did in 1955 was to set the

⁵⁹ Christopher Hill, "Puritans and the Poor" in: *Past & Present*, No 2 (1952), pp. 32-50; id., "The Poor and the Parish", in *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*, pp. 259-97 (London, 1964); see also V. G. Kiernan, "Puritanism and the Poor", in: *Past & Present*, No 3 (1953), pp. 45-51, for a comment on Hill's article, and T. H. Breen, "The Non-Existent Controversy: Puritan and Anglican Attitudes on Work and Wealth, 1600-1640", in: *Church History*, XXXV (1966), pp. 273-87; Jordan, *Philanthropy in England*, pp. 155ff.

⁶⁰ Save for an especially intolerant attitude toward the non-impotent poor, these were also the themes of the Paul's Cross sermons. Millar Maclure, *The Paul's Cross Sermons, 1534-1642* (Toronto, 1958).

⁶¹ See Coleman, "Labour in the English Economy", loc. cit., pp. 112-38; Charles Wilson, "The Other Face of Mercantilism", in: *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth Series, IX (1959), pp. 81-101.

understanding of those observations within the concept of a pre-industrial society, i.e. one in which productivity was low, in which underemployment was common and in which, because little surplus capital and few technological means were available to increase productivity, a more intensive use of labor was turned to. The emphasis given the need to set the poor on work in the last half of the seventeenth century should be seen as a function of the structure of a pre-industrial society, in competition with other national economies.⁶² Three years later, Charles Wilson in effect responded to Coleman's call for another look at Mercantilism and the poor. Wilson was anxious to rescue the great merchants of 1660-1760 from the perdition assigned them by R. H. Tawney *et al.* Wilson wrote:

Historians have underestimated the gravity and over-simplified the complexity of the great debate on the poor. Faced by the difficulty of analysing the relations between states of mind and private interests, between thoughts and actions, they have too often been satisfied with what are fundamentally *a priori* conclusions.⁶³

Mercantilists were not “the lusty plutocracy of the Restoration, roaring after its meat”;⁶⁴ they did not grind the faces of the poor; they were not severe and cynical capitalists. To Wilson, the number and variety of their charitable undertakings for the laboring poor especially attested to the congruence, not the antipathy, of the mercantilist ethic with the needs of the poor.

In the main, recent research has concerned itself with how the great isms of the day – Protestantism, Humanism, Mercantilism – affected attitudes toward the poor. Its contributions have been substantial. However, the need to connect attitudes to economic realities remains. It is a formidable task, and one likely to daunt even social-science-orientated historians. But we also need to sort out the major and minor, the long-term and the short-term themes in that vast contemporary literature on attitudes. It is the simpler task, for which two illustrations should suffice.

Tract writers of the 1660's and 1670's alleged that tallymen and pawn-brokers lent to the poor at exorbitant rates of interest. They condemned the practice and urged the creation of public lending institutions from which the poor could borrow at reasonable rates. Were those allegations and their attendant censures largely confined to the 1660's and 1670's, as they appear

⁶² This is the approach taken by L. A. Clarkson in his recent text book *The Pre-Industrial Economy in England, 1500-1750* (London, 1971).

⁶³ Wilson, “The Other Face of Mercantilism”, *loc. cit.*, p. 87.

⁶⁴ R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York, 1926), p. 221.

to have been?⁶⁵ And did that reaction then to what was probably a traditional recourse reflect some short-term shift in attitude toward the poor?

The long-term theme of work for the able-bodied received a great deal of attention from the 1530's to 1700, but especially during the seventeenth century. The regard which the impotent poor had traditionally received shifted to the laboring poor and to those poor (including children) who were thought capable of accepting work values. And yet there was ambivalence in the attitude toward the able-bodied. Were they a national resource or a national burden? Should they be permitted mobility or no? Should they be considered mainly as threats to the rates, to public order – or as potential workers? Who was to provide the work: government, philanthropists, or a seventeenth-century “hidden hand”? What was the value of their labor? Were some work-shy and some not? Could tests be devised to tell the difference? To the end of the seventeenth century and beyond, the belief persisted that work was available for those who wanted work. Contemporary commentators, we may suggest, could not have known one way or the other, or if they did know, could only have known something about their own locality. Yet no one applied geographical limitations to his assertions. One can conjecture that such assertions expressed discordant though deep-seated convictions – partly communal, partly individualist – about how their society should operate. It may have been less unsettling in an unsettled time to assume that work was available, and that most of the unemployed were work-shy, than to assume that the economy did not offer sufficient work. A “work-shy” assumption justified minimal relief and the receipt of it in demeaning or punitive conditions – in workhouses at the end of the seventeenth century, for example. A “failure of the economy” assumption meant that the volume of relief should be much greater, since by that assumption underemployed individuals themselves were blameless for their indigence.

During the Restoration particularly, the watershed between medieval and modern attitudes toward work occurred. Perhaps the most remarkable manifestation of that change was the half-conscious realization that work possessed, to use modern parlance, both instrumental and expressive dimensions.⁶⁶ Instrumental work refers to that which was unfulfilling in

⁶⁵ Representative titles are: *Observations Manifesting the Conveniency and Commodity of Mount Pietyes, or Public Bancks for Reliefe of the Poor* (London, 1661); *Four for a Penny: Or, Poor Robin's Character of an unconscionable Pawnbroker, and Ear-mark of an oppressing Tallyman* (London, 1678); and *Experimented Proposals* (London, 1666).

⁶⁶ See Alasdair Clayre, *Work and Play: Ideas and Experience of Work and Leisure* (New York, 1976), for an introduction to the history of work.

itself and thus was performed to serve other, extrinsic ends. One of those other ends was the insistence of the employing classes and of those writers newly interested in national competitiveness during the Restoration that the poor perform disciplined labor because it was natural to do so, because it would improve England's foreign-trade competitiveness, and because it would deflect the turbulence of the poor into quiet and productive channels. Labor itself was presumed to be unattractive. Houses of correction, workhouses, and various work-training schemes were designed to acclimatize the poor to the world of labor discipline. Wage levels also figured in the debate. Those who put the case for high wages expected the poor to be receptive to monetary incentives; proponents of low-wage levels held that the threat of destitution would compel workers to labor regularly. However, there was another way of looking at work.

Expressive work is that work which is self-fulfilling, an end in itself. Perhaps because many Restoration commentators regarded their own work as expressive, they believed that the lower orders could come to enjoy their work once they were properly introduced to it. Many writers sang paeans to the joys of lower-class work and life. On occasion, they even professed envy of the lower orders. One can see in the Restoration yet another chasm of misunderstanding slowly opening up between the perceptions of the middling sort of writer and entrepreneur, and the views of the poor themselves as inferred from their behavior. Work then is a long-term theme with multiple ramifications.⁶⁷

In summary, a review of recent research on Tudor-Stuart poverty illustrates the truth of the statement that that research has produced no surprises, no controversies. In the main, it has continued to explore questions first posed a generation or two ago. And yet signs of changing research interests – in vagrancy and in urban poverty, for example – are evident. Perhaps the time is now ripe for the further expansion of research interests particularly into the broad areas of public relief and of attitudes. Whether they choose traditional or new research areas, historians of Tudor-Stuart poverty have an immense amount of work to do.

⁶⁷ Attitudes toward work are scattered throughout the writings of Petty, Mun, Child, Hale, Firmin, and lesser lights. E. S. Furniss, *The Position of the Laborer in a System of Nationalism: A Study in the Labor Theories of the Later English Mercantilists* (Boston, 1920), remains the standard introduction. See also Coats, "The Relief of Poverty", *loc. cit.*