Logic of Charity: Poor Relief in Preindustrial Europe

To suggest that the social history of Europe is unintelligible without an understanding of poor relief is only a slight exaggeration. The problem of poverty has recurred throughout the centuries, and was, in different ways, a problem for rich and poor alike. The central concern of the poor was how to survive; the problem of the elites was the poor. Thousands of charitable institutions existed in various forms, influencing the lives of most of the population in preindustrial Europe. Assistance for the poor was closely related to the involvement of economic pressure groups, the position of the various social groups in society, the distribution of political power, and the role of those who held that power. This article is a discussion of the function of charity in preindustrial Europe and provides answers to three questions: which groups provided poor relief and why, which groups received poor relief and why, and what were the effects of poor relief on society?

Historians, social scientists, and welfare economists have produced a large literature on poor relief that has been surveyed using three approaches. The first suggests that charity in various regions and at different periods in preindustrial Europe displayed general characteristics. The poor tried to survive in ways enormously ingenious but comparable. The involvement of the European elites in charity also displayed striking similarities. The merits of this first approach are simplicity and insightfulness. A drawback is that local and temporal particulars become invisible.

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The second approach assumes that societies were composed of purposefully acting men and women who had ordered preferences and, individually or in groups, tried to obtain their goals as best they could with the means at their disposal. This appealingly simple assumption should not be taken literally. Nobody will assert that all men and women acted purposefully all of the time. Rather, it should be taken to mean that most people in most situations based their actions on perceived interests. Naturally, this leaves open the possibility that some actions have unintended consequences, or that mortals may err when choosing the most rewarding strategy. Furthermore, historical actors were constrained in their options, and these constraints differed according to society, period, and social group. The historical situation restricted the set of alternative actions and determined which strategies were most rewarding. A weakness of this approach is that forms of "pure altruism" are not taken into account. They undoubtedly played some part in charity, but they cannot be modeled fruitfully.

In the third approach, two groups of actors are distinguished. This categorization also simplifies the historical reality of populations that contained different kinds of elite, various sorts of poor, and, in addition, a multitude of middling classes. Initially, however, it will be advantageous to lose sight of certain distinctions in order to understand the general outlines better, especially because little is known about those distinctions. This approach argues that elites invested in poor relief because they had an interest in doing so. Poor relief was a control strategy, influencing the behavior of the poor in ways that were advantageous to elites. Conversely, the poor accepted poor relief because it was profitable to do so. It was a survival strategy, a means of increasing their chances to survive. This argument implies the existence of some, if limited, measure of choice. The elites could realize their interests in ways other than providing assistance, just as the poor could draw on survival strategies other than charity. Preindustrial poor relief functioned as a "bargaining process." The elites provided money, food, and services, but only under certain conditions and as a "package deal." These conditions had to be in the interests of the elites, but also attractive to the poor. If the elites did not use poor relief as a control strategy, the poor could not use it as a survival strategy, and vice versa.
The approaches mentioned above have been derived from studies in the fields of history, sociology, and welfare economics. A few are mentioned here, but their approaches often differ in many ways. The general idea of analyzing societies in terms of the purposeful actions of persons who are developing strategies to realize perceived interests in a given social context, is taken from Boudon. Olson formulated an innovative theory relating to conditions favoring or barring the creation of collective goods by individuals. De Swaan has provided an original analysis of the development of social welfare in Europe and the United States, in part based on Olson’s work. Studies by de Swaan, Gutton, Lis, Soly, and van Damme have demonstrated the manifold similarities in the functioning of poor relief in preindustrial Europe. Boyer has shed much light on why, and how, English rural elites made use of charity. The strategic behavior of the poor has been stressed particularly in studies by Popkin on Vietnamese peasant communities, Murray on the poor in the United States, and Portes on the inhabitants of Latin-American slums. A multitude of survival strategies for the preindustrial poor in Europe has been documented by Hufton and Lis, and Lees has described the pragmatic use of the poor law by the English poor.¹

ELITES AND POOR RELIEF How important was poor relief for European elites and to what extent could they influence it? Three issues are relevant: the collective interests of elites, the “free-rider problem” and mechanisms to counter it, and the degree to which elites were in a position to influence charity. Five collective interests are discussed: the labor market, the social order, the public order, the risk of infection, and moral behavior.

The labor-reserve theory argues that members of the labor force were given relief if their presence was of interest to local elites. Assistance was provided to those essential segments of the labor force who could not live from their work alone and who, in the absence of charity, would have had to migrate, resort to illegal activities, or face starvation. Often, the groups that were helped were those that were vulnerable because of the imperfections characteristic of preindustrial labor markets. These markets were characterized by sharp seasonal and cyclical fluctuations, resulting in a strong increase in the demand for labor in summer and during an economic upturn, and a sizable decrease in winter and during economic decline. In slack periods it might be rational for employers to assist workers, ensuring their availability at times when demand for labor was high. In the case of England, 1750–1850, Boyer has demonstrated that to dispense relief to rural laborers was economically rational for large farmers, under two conditions. To begin with, seasonal fluctuations in labor demand had to be high in two periods of the year. In addition, labor-hiring farmers had to be able to have other taxpayers (family farmers, shopkeepers, and artisans) pay for part of the cost of this outdoor relief. If both conditions were met, alternative ways to cope with seasonal fluctuations in labor demand would be less cost-effective. Migrant labor, for example, was generally not available in spring and, in any case, a farmer could never be sure when and how many migrants would arrive. Paying higher wages in summer or providing rural laborers with small pieces of land were also less efficient alternatives.

Poor relief was so finely tuned that, in combination with other sources of income, it enabled a labor reserve to exist and discouraged the migration of rural laborers to cities. Boyer’s analysis explained the timing and geographical pattern of outdoor relief for agricultural workers. This system was only cost-effective in grain-growing regions of England, where the demand for labor during the sowing and harvest seasons was much higher than during the winter. The introduction of the allowance system coincided with the decline of rural industry and with rising land prices; thus an alternative source of income for rural laborers declined and another option—supplying them with small pieces of land—became less attractive.

Socially, European elites endeavored to stabilize the existing social order by means of poor relief. To the poor, the social order was presented as God-given, and therefore legitimate and changeless. This conception was based on a degree of reciprocity: the well-to-do were under an obligation to assist the poor, and the latter had a duty to accept the world as it was. By accepting money and goods, the poor were made to accept the legitimacy of the existing social order. The children of the poor were obliged to go to pauper schools, receiving education that stressed the justice and invariability of the social order. The attempts by elites to minimize upward social mobility are situated within this framework. Assistance was also given to impoverished persons of good families in order to mitigate sharp downward mobility. These Shame-Faced Poor, Pauvres Honteux, or Verschämte Armen received greater assistance than the ordinary poor and under less stringent conditions.3

Politically, poor relief was intended to safeguard public order. Destitution for the many might easily lead to discontent. Fear of the poor was widespread, especially during times of high food prices: “classes laborieuses, classes dangereuses.” Poor relief was advantageous if its costs were less than those of other means to

maintain public order and protect property and lives. Assistance to the needy would check their hunger and, to some extent, shield the rich from the undesirable behavior of the hungry poor: "poor relief was the ransom paid by the rich to keep their windows, as well as their consciences intact."^4

Medically, poor relief could reduce the danger of infection. The same diseases that decimated the poor could kill the rich. It therefore made sense to ensure that paupers, willingly or not, received medical help, in the form of smallpox inoculations for instance, as a condition of poor relief.^5

Morally, elites tried to "civilize" or "discipline" the poor, to curb undesirable behavior by teaching the poor new values and norms. This initiative may seem strange—why not leave the poor "uncivilized"?—but poverty was thought of as a moral problem, a consequence of a seamy way of life. To give assistance without attaching moral conditions would only reproduce squalor. Because a lack of discipline and a preference for leisure were considered major causes of unemployment, poor relief had to stimulate paupers to work. Another complaint was related to the family life of the poor. The reproduction of poverty as a result of ill-advised marriages and extramarital sex had to be checked. Malthus advised the poor to pay heed to "moral constraints" before deciding to marry. In various German regions in the first half of the nineteenth century, the right to marry was restricted by law. Local authorities were determined that paupers unable to support a family remain single. Once married, a decent family life shielded a family from poverty; a "bad" family life, in contrast, lay at the root of all evil. Relief could be tied to instruction in family ethics, and be deprived to those unwilling to listen. Lack of education was, allegedly, another cause of poverty. The ranks of the poor included numerous unskilled, uneducated la-


borers. The education of the poor became an important issue from the late eighteenth century onward. Education seemed to be a solution to the problem of poverty; the children of the needy could be instructed in vocational skills and in basic reading, writing, and arithmetic—but not much more since the elite’s attitude was that education ought to remain appropriate to one’s class.  

Poor relief has been regarded as a many-sided instrument that could be used by elites to realize collective interests. The fact that a group of people has an interest in a collective good is, however, no guarantee that it will either be made or maintained. Olson’s theory makes this clear. A good is a collective good, in Olson’s definition, if all members of a group have access to it and no one can be excluded from its use. Olson demonstrated that collective goods can be problematic because of the free-rider problem. The nonexcludibility of a good implies that a member of a group profits, even if he or she makes no contribution to it. It is rational for a group member to want to enjoy the benefits of an arrangement without paying the costs. This desire can lead to the paradoxical situation that a collective good does not come into being, or works suboptimally, although its proper functioning is beneficial to all members of a group. The free-rider problem may hinder collective arrangements such as hospitals, charitable provisions, new roads, or sewerage; it operates in all but small groups. Fortunately, this problem can be solved, under certain conditions. The state, as a third party involved, may administer a collective good and force people to pay for it. Present-day European welfare states are prime examples: states levy social security contributions and other taxes, fine fraudulent or reluctant contributors, and control the system of social security.

In many preindustrial regions, however, charity was not solely administered at a national level by the state but at a local

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or regional level by means of voluntary financial donations or personal participation in charitable bodies. Thus, state intervention as a solution to the free-rider problem is not a sufficient explanation for the functioning of preindustrial charity. An alternative solution to the free-rider problem is to give some members of a group selective incentives to contribute to a collective good. These selective incentives can be positive, rewarding individuals who contribute to the collective good, or negative, punishing those who do not. Selective incentives may operate in the form of praise for cooperative members and shame for free-riders (thus establishing or harming their reputation). They may also operate through the existence of positive side effects of cooperation: joining an occupational association, for example, may further a common cause and, at the same time, extend entitlements, such as sickness benefits, to an individual.8

Which selective incentives operated in the area of preindustrial charity? It was often prestigious to be a guardian of the poor. Guardians and liberal donators gained social status. Their charitable duties were, so to speak, signs of reliability. Participation in poor relief legitimized the privileged position that members of the establishment held, or, in the case of the nouveaux riches, to which they aspired. Poor relief thus became a Legitimierung des Glückes: those fortunate enough to belong to the high ranks of society were obliged to legitimize their luck. Poor relief was a many-sided litmus test: vis-à-vis one’s peers, apropos subordinate members of society, and, in fact, toward God and one’s own conscience. In another respect too, charity could be useful; the nouveaux riches, economically successful but socially inferior, could exchange money or time for social capital.9

8 Olson’s work has been the source of a considerable body of literature demonstrating that the free-rider problem can be mitigated. Actors may have knowledge of each other’s previous behavior which can be used to predict future behavior. Further, actors are sometimes engaged in more than one interaction over time; they may know that non-cooperation at one moment will be penalized at the next, which should make them more cooperative. It is also true that collective action may begin in small groups, where the free-rider problem is relatively small, and spread to other members of the collectivity over time. In real life, Olson’s view may be the worst case scenario.

Charity also presented opportunities to further one’s political career and to dispense patronage. Being a guardian of a poor-relief institution provided young members of the elite with the chance to develop administrative abilities and a social network. Schama noted that in the Dutch Republic “those offices most closely connected with the superintendence of the needy were . . . often rewarded to cadet recruits, who in their turn regarded them as staging posts to grander styles and grosser pickings.” To oversee the poor was an investment in future wealth and power. It could also increase present power. In Calvin’s Geneva, care of the Hôpital fell to Procureurs, who also had considerable political influence. Kingdon remarked that “their control of every government ration of food to every poor family in the city must also have given them considerable political leverage.” In nineteenth-century England, suffrage was based on the amount of poor law tax paid, and those administering poor relief had the opportunity to manipulate electoral registers. Patronage—a common feature of preindustrial societies—also played a role in charity. Guardians of the poor were able to favor their clients with assistance or jobs. Charitable institutions provided employment to persons in clerical or supervisory positions, to contractors, bookkeepers, stockbrokers, artisans, and laborers. This provision of jobs could be beneficial to the guardians too, as it was in Calvin’s Geneva.10

Assisting the needy was also a religious obligation. Until the twentieth century, a major part of poor relief in Western Europe was administered by church bodies. In countries with various religions, poor relief could be used as a means to preserve fellow believers or even to win new ones. Religious motives did not function as selective incentives solving the free-rider problem of collective goods, but they did shift the free-rider problem from


elites as a whole to those of particular denominations. This shift from a large group to many smaller ones diminished the problem. Sincere compassion with poor people from one’s own village, town, or region, for the most part in combination with biblical commandments, also induced the upper classes to give. To some extent this giving was pure altruism: a laudatory phenomenon which cannot be incorporated into a model of goal-oriented action. Another, complementary, vision nonetheless exists of poor relief as the sine qua non of spiritual welfare: “le pauvre est un être social utile . . . il permet au rich de se sauver en faissant l’aumône,” and “charity then was a way for rich man to buy salvation.” Schama, elaborating on the “embarrassment of riches” in the Dutch republic, observed “that if the poor and derelict plainly needed the charity of the rich, it is no less true . . . that the rich needed the poor for the quiet of their souls.” Norberg wrote that the Catholic faith acted as a selective incentive in Grenoble: “Catholicism encouraged charitable giving . . . It successfully attached personal benefit to the common good by promising benefactors distinct rewards—Eternal Salvation—and misers distinct penalties—Eternal Damnation.”

A distinction between collective and private interests is useful for analytical purposes but in real life, distinctions were often blurred. They were not always and everywhere equally important. Lis and Soly argued that in England regulation of the labor market was the chief challenge for the upper classes and thus the prime reason for helping the needy; in France maintenance of public order was more important. They also drew attention to the fact that elites in Western Europe could fissure, creating different groups with both similar and rival claims. A labor market ideally suited to employers, a tranquil society with low welfare expenditure favored by politicians, and instruction in the teachings of the church—a clergyman’s priority—were not always compatible.

The free-rider problem faced by a single town or a village could also obstruct collective arrangements between towns or


villages. For any particular town, it was tempting not to care for the needy, provided some other region helped them. De Swaan showed that villages acting from pure self-interest created a collective outcome that was inferior to what would have resulted if they had cooperated. He argued that the geographical dilemma of charity—how any one region can be sure that other regions will contribute to a collective arrangement—was not solved once and for all, but rather many times and gradually. En route from local care at the village level to national frameworks for social welfare, this dilemma had to be solved more than once, in the course of which the results covered increasingly larger geographical units.

The notion that poor relief was a control strategy used by elites assumes that elites could exert a strong influence on poor relief either directly—for example, as administrators—or indirectly, as benefactors. Surprisingly, however, few studies have been done of the social origins of poor relief administrators. We do know that in sixteenth-century Geneva these administrators belonged overwhelmingly to the "power elite," the "small group of families who controlled the city." In Aix-en-Provence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they were drawn from the ruling classes of French society, noblemen, lawyers, and prominent merchants, selected in part on the basis of their social status and wealth. In Grenoble the nobility supplied administrators in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; in the following century these were drawn from the professional classes—judges, businessmen, and doctors. Guardians of the poor in the Dutch town of Leiden in the eighteenth century were part of the top stratum of Leiden's bourgeoisie and, as a rule, were men of property. They were not, however, among the political elite. In Rotterdam during the first half of the nineteenth century Reformed, or Calvinist, deacons were typically young businessmen who did not belong to the social elite of the patrician families. Boyer cited Digby, who wrote that large farmers in Norfolk were "exploiting their position as poor law administrators" to ensure a labor reserve. In conclusion, it is clear that in some, but not all, instances

13 De Swaan, In Care, 13–51.
guardians of the poor were selected from the upper classes of society, who were thus able to use charity to further their interests.

The way that preindustrial European charity was financed remains largely obscure. In England under the Old Poor Law a pauper tax was levied per city or village; all persons of sufficient means thereby contributed to assisting the needy. In other countries, like France or the Netherlands, benevolent societies were financed, wholly or in part, through donations of individual benefactors, from interest on assets, or by selling capital goods. The composition of total income according to source is seldom known. The funding of charity remains an essential but neglected component of social welfare in the past.

Another area that is little studied by historians relates to the advantages and disadvantages of poor relief to elites compared with other means of social control. It is almost impossible to say much about this comparison at present since studies of relief from the point of view of purposefully acting elites, faced with a choice of alternative strategies, are few. Boyer presented a systematic, nonfunctionalist discussion of the alternatives to poor relief available to large farmers in England wishing to obtain sufficient labor. In addition, various studies by Lis and Soly have given some indications. Raising wages, temporary employment schemes, or handing out food stamps formed economic alternatives to poor relief allowances; repression was a political alternative, as was the confinement of paupers to workhouses. The range of alternatives was rich, however, the comparative advantages and disadvantages of each remain unclear.

THE POOR AND POOR RELIEF  A large proportion of the population in preindustrial Europe was poor. Structural changes in the European economy brought destitution during certain periods or in some regions. High grain prices and severe winters caused problems in some years. The adaptive family economy acted as a shield against poverty, and if one did not belong to it trouble lay ahead. Even under the lee of the family, however, certain phases of the family life cycle caused distress. Destitution not only hit particular groups in certain regions, it might have struck

_De hervormde diaconie te Rotterdam in de 19e eeuw_ (Rotterdam, 1977), 92–96; Boyer, _Economic History_, 81, 141.
almost every European at one time or another. Some groups were especially prone to destitution: the sick and infirm, the elderly, widows with children, workers with large families, and casual laborers. Why did the poor accept relief? The most obvious reason was economic, but there were alternative economic survival strategies, and relief had its drawbacks. In some circumstances these alternatives could be more attractive, since assistance could well mean social control. The poor lived in an “economy of makeshifts,” using a “combination of ad-hoc expedients.”

Surviving meant having to resort to a combination of survival strategies.

Women’s labor, as a way of supplementing the inadequate income of husbands but also as a source of income for single women, was widespread in both preindustrial and industrial Europe. Women more often than not ended up in unskilled, low-wage jobs. In times of adversity they might be forced to trade a legal and “honorable” occupation for an illegal and “dishonorable” activity, such as prostitution: “partout la misère est le meilleur recruteur de la prostitution.” Some English and French female textile workers switched to prostitution during periods of mass unemployment: “morals fluctuate with trade.”

Not only poor men and women worked; children did too. Some helped their parents at work, and others made a living on the streets—delivering messages, carrying parcels, or shining shoes. Children—small, quick, and endearing—made excellent beggars. Hufton calls begging “a kind of patrimony for poor children.” Adults begged too. It was “une ressource ordinaire dans le menu peuple,” according to Gutton. The variety of beggars was staggering. Tramps, vagabonds, and rogues, alone or in bands, roamed from village to village, from town to town, and prowled around the countryside. Every town had professional and occasional beggars. Some hung on to an arbitrary pedestrian for dear life; others had a fixed spot, near a church entrance for

15 Hufton, Poor; Treble, Urban Poverty, 79.
example; still others made weekly rounds, on a certain day and
at a fixed hour, to a philanthropist known to them, asking for a
chunk of bread, a piece of sausage, or alms. Some asked in a
more friendly fashion than others. Children, adults, and the el-
derly begged in the streets of Europe, asking, appealing, de-
manding, or threatening. Begging, too, was a survival strategy.
Van Holthoorn found that during periods of great distress in the
Dutch province of Groningen more ordinary workers resorted to
begging than in normal years. Poverty forced them. They were
not the only ones. Faced with high unemployment, silk weavers
in Lyon took to begging.\(^1\) Some occupational groups combined
their occupation with requests for alms. For hawkers this strategy
was almost inevitable. A modest stroke of bad luck meant that
they could not purchase their stock, inexpensive as it was, and
they were forced to ask for small donations.

Poor people robbed and cheated, but they also rendered mu-
tual support. Old women and young girls took care of babies for
a small fee or for free. A kind neighbor would run errands for an
ill pauper; if a poor person had no food during a holiday, a
neighbor might provide some. Mutual assistance by neighbors,
family, people from the same region, by those sharing a common
religion or occupation was a consequence of mutual poverty, and
not just in the preindustrial era. A study of London's poor at the
end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century
noted that: “few families were so secure that they knew they
would never need help, and so mutual assistance seemed not only
the right way to live but the sensible way also.” The poor helped
each other in finding work, too. Casual workers relied on leads
and a good reference to find a job, which tied them to their place
of residence. The costs of building networks of informants were
high, which explains why, despite their destitution, casual labor-
ers in cities like Glasgow, Liverpool, London, and Manchester
were so immobile. Yet, extreme poverty could force men and
women to leave their native region. In order to minimize migra-
tion costs, migrants often used familiar routes and relied on ex-

114; Gutton \textit{La société}, 21–40, 80–84, 153; Kaplow, \textit{Names}, 127–134, 146; Angelika Ko-
Control: Government Policy and Beggary in the Province of Groningen between 1823 and
isting social networks. Auvergnats usually headed for Paris, Lyon, Chartres, and Orléans and became water or wood carriers; those from Limousin became construction workers. On arrival, migrants from the same region often lived in the same parts of the city and helped each other. Migrants from Auvergne even managed to monopolize the water-carrying trade: outsiders were beaten up. The dishonest poor, tramps, rogues, and criminals on the road also used these social networks.  

The assistance that the poor rendered each other was based on an intuitive knowledge of the value of what sociologists and anthropologists call social capital. Men and women can further their life chances by using their resources—economic, political, their knowledge of social norms and cultural codes, and formal qualifications—and those of their friends, family, and acquaintances. “Investments” in social capital are partly determined, as is the case with financial capital, by the expected “rate of return.” The rate of return for investing in social contacts is particularly high for the poor. They lack alternative channels in which to invest; they cannot accumulate political or cultural capital. Common sense tells them that whoever renders a friend a service may expect one back in times of need. Such times would always come. The virtual certainty that an investment would pay off in the future naturally increased the willingness to invest. Mutual assistance was not solely a form of spreading risks over time. Help from people of the same region meant that the poor had access to resources otherwise inaccessible, and they may have obtained information otherwise foregone. This phenomenon has been termed “the strength of weak ties.” Finding employment was

often achieved through weak ties—through acquaintances or people from the same region—as opposed to family. Weak ties opened up another series of social contacts to supplement one’s immediate contacts. 19

Crime was also a means to survive. In Germany and France in the nineteenth century a remarkable correlation existed between grain prices and crime. Men and women who normally made an honest living were forced to steal during hard times. But what is theft? What a property owner considers theft may be regarded by the thief as an exertion of an almost legitimate privilege. In the Black Country in England during the first half of the nineteenth century, miners and others made a subtle distinction between illegitimate stealing and legitimate taking. Poor women felt that they had a right to take coal from the waste heaps: “the ‘black gleaning’ of coal tips was seen as analogous to agricultural gleaning—a traditional right of the poor to the inferior leavings.” There was the “right” to remove pieces of metal or tools from the workplace. This practice also existed in other parts of England in the eighteenth century. Coal dockers on the Thames felt that they were entitled to small amounts of coal. Workers emptying a ship’s hold might take some sugar, grain, or the contents of torn sacks (and sacks with a desirable content might be prone to tear). Foucault termed these “illegalisms.” Every social class embraced evasions of the law during the ancien régime. The rich were fortunate enough to have privileges granting exemptions from the law. The poor had none, but they

benefitted, within the margins of what was imposed on them by law and custom, from a space of tolerance, gained by force or obstinacy; and this space was for them so indispensable a condition of existence that they were often ready to rise up to defend it; the attempts that were made periodically to reduce it . . . provoked popular disturbances, just as attempts to reduce certain privileges disturbed the nobility, the clergy and the bourgeoisie. 20


In the struggle for survival, pawning was helpful, as was the ability to build up rent arrears or to buy on credit. These practices often had a fixed place in the daily life of the needy. Sunday clothes were redeemed on payday (Friday or Saturday), only to be hocked again the following Monday. Most landlords were inclined to give tenants some leeway at difficult times, if only because most tenants faced problems in paying rent every now and then. Local shops were forced to give credit as a form of customer relations. Often this meant that customers had to buy inferior goods, at higher prices than elsewhere, or pay high rates of interest. Destitute customers might consider this unjust, but the shopkeeper, eking out a meager living, could equally well justify it as compensation for bad debts. It did imply, however, that the poor had to pay more: poverty gave birth to poverty. To live on credit was not only an expensive means to survive, it also immobilized shopkeepers and their poor customers. The poor could leave without notice, but then they lost their “right” to credit, acquired over a long time.21

Guilds or friendly societies protected some members of the labor force, that is, those who could afford to make contributions, and only when these mutual societies had sufficient funds available to help poor members. Nevertheless, sometimes a significant proportion of the labor force received a sizable amount, especially for an illness or for covering funeral costs. Charity was also a way to survive. In preindustrial Europe many charitable bodies assisted the institutionalized poor, or gave outdoor relief in the form of an allowance. Outdoor relief took the form of money, bread and other nourishment, peat, and clothes, as well as medical help, education, and Bible classes. It is not known exactly what proportion of Europe’s population received charity; it was presumably large. Hufton believed, for example, that approximately

one-third of the population of France was assisted in the second half of the eighteenth century, and the majority of Antwerp’s workers in the period 1770–1860 received aid. The poor chose the assortment of survival strategies that offered them the most benefits at the least cost. Depending on costs, benefits, and alternatives, charity could be included in this assortment; it was a potential alternative to prostitution, theft, begging, and the like.

What was the value of poor relief for the poor? Woolf was positive: “charity could become an important or even regular source of income for the poor.” Hufton, however, wrote about the “total inadequacy of formal relief.” She stated that for large segments of the poor “formal institutional relief was not a factor in their struggle for survival.” The divergence of opinion here may reflect differences between localities and periods. Even so, it is possible to make a few general remarks. For one, relief was likely to have been of importance to many of the poor. Even a small amount of help could mean the difference between a tolerable existence and fathomless misery. Poor relief offered a relatively certain source of income in an otherwise uncertain world, and it could be combined with other survival strategies.

What disadvantages were associated with accepting poor relief? Accepting charity meant abstaining from illegal survival strategies and accepting forms of social control. To deserve help, one had to behave deferentially and “decently,” could not migrate, nor openly resort to begging, prostitution, crime, or looting. To the extent that poor relief was free of obligation and the value of charity was high at a time when the authorities punished begging, theft, and migration, poor relief was attractive. It could be given in cash, in kind or a combination of both. Whether relief took the form of outright dole, at the one extreme, or incarceration, at the other, was not decided by the poor, but it was important to them. Indoor relief had a higher monetary value than outdoor relief, but it also entailed a higher degree of social control. In addition, the workhouse was ill-suited to those in need of social contacts—the underemployed trying to find work, for example.

In nineteenth-century London, the type of assistance was not fixed, but it was partially dependent on the strategic behavior of the poor: “Since poor law aid came in several forms, potential

22 Hufton, Poor, 126; Lis, Social Change, 127.
23 Woolf, Poor, 39; Hufton, Poor, 174, 176.
clients could discriminate and shape demands to what was available. Applying for relief was an active, negotiated process between administrators and the poor."\textsuperscript{24} London paupers regularly applied for assistance when ill or unemployed, at the birth of a child, or when faced with the costs of a funeral. They believed that they had a right to choose the type of relief most suitable: medical help when ill, financial aid when out of work, a small pension for their elderly parents so that they would not have to be their parents’ keepers, or even incarceration of burdensome family members in workhouses, hospitals, or lunatic asylums.

Poor relief was not only an economic survival strategy; it also provided paupers with certain facilities—education for their children, medical help, and free Bible classes. The poor might try to exploit these facilities to their own advantage, regardless of the intentions of those providing them. For example, pauper schools could be used as day-care centers, without the poor attaching too much significance to the moral lessons that were taught. Some workers “out of their own free will . . . turned to the authorities to discipline members of their group—a rational way to act, because the survival margins were small indeed.” In Antwerp, at the close of the ancien régime, one in thirty-nine households asked the authorities to lock up a troublesome relative—mostly husbands or sons who failed to contribute to the family budget and spent their days idle.\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{MUTUAL INTERDEPENDENCE} Institutionalized bargaining took place between elites and poor through charitable bodies. Charity functioned at the same time as a control strategy for the elites and a survival strategy for the poor. Donors and recipients of relief were dependent on each other in the sense that both preferred some kind of cooperation to none at all. But, next to mutual accommodation the precise nature of that cooperation was the outcome of conflicting interests. Charity became the object of, mostly tacit, bargaining. Mutual interdependence did not mean equal power or equal benefits, and, in the process of bargaining, the needy, locked in a struggle for life, held the weakest cards. The poor were not entirely without power, however: the problem

\textsuperscript{24} Lees, “Survival,” 69.

\textsuperscript{25} Cf. Lis and Soly, “Policing,” 124; Lis, Soly, and Van Damme, \textit{Op vrije voeten?}, 34–37, 120–127, quotation, 127; Lis and Soly, “‘Total Institutions’," 47–48, 61–62.
of the poor was their poverty; the problem of the rich was the poor. A “perpetual commerce of charity” connected rich and poor.  

Outdoor poor relief was not the only way for elites to realize their interests. There were alternatives, such as regulating bread prices, establishing employment projects, using police force or the Grand Enfermement. In turn, the poor could choose survival strategies other than charity if conditions for its provision were too demanding or the amount that was given was too low. The choices that the poor made were important to the elite. If a labor reserve of assisted workers were to disappear, employers would suffer. Shameless paupers or persistent beggars were a nuisance to elites. Looting was a threat to privileged positions; it was not just a form of anger and frustration, it was also a technique to pressure elites, a “collective bargaining by riot.” A child not vaccinated against smallpox was a risk to the health of elites. A pauper refusing assistance posed a threat to the eternal salvation of charitable donors. Elites had to take the wishes of the poor into account. In making a decision, they had to anticipate the reaction of the armies of the poor, exemplifying what Friedrich has termed the “rule of anticipated action.”

This dependency between rich and poor over the centuries may have led to a system of rights and duties. Several authors contend that in preindustrial Europe the poor thought that they had a right to relief and, conversely, the rich felt themselves obliged to give aid. On the surface, it seems odd to include a system of rights and obligations in a theoretical perspective based on rational actors, but only if historical actors act contrary to their perceived interests because of a current norm. If a norm were simply a reflection of an actual situation, the paradox would be resolved. A norm may act as a precept, a “focal point,” solving a complex problem involving the weighing of unlike pros and cons, both with regard to conflicts between elites and the poor.


and between elites themselves. A landowner who paid his rural laborers wages that were inadequate to live on was not only ensured of a labor reserve through the system of charity, but, as an overseer of the poor, his social standing grew among his peers and among villagers, despite his actions as an employer. In addition, he was able to fulfill his duty as a Christian and so could await the Kingdom of God with a clear conscience; he also had the advantage of being in a better position to persuade the poor that the world was just: “A moral order that encompasses the poor, whom it must persuade of the rightness of property, in justifying their exclusion also establishes their claim to part of the surplus. The same God that forbids stealing also demands charity,” as de Swaan noted. Or, as Sen wrote, “inequalities often survive precisely by making allies out of the deprived. The Undertaker comes to accept the legitimacy of the unequal order and becomes an implicit accomplice.”

Some European poor considered assistance from authorities a right. English and French poor in the eighteenth century felt that the state was obliged to take measures to counter hoarding and to prevent prices from rising in times of dearth and famine. The authorities had to provide grain at affordable prices; otherwise, the poor would confiscate stocks from speculators, subsequently auctioning the grain at prices deemed reasonable—a *taxation populaire*. According to some historians, the poor also saw poor relief as a right. This view did not imply that the poor fully accepted the demands that charity made on them or were overjoyed with the benefits that it brought them, but merely that, with the resources at their disposal, it seemed the best bargain that they could strike.

### Effects of Poor Relief

At the end of the preindustrial era, criticism of poor relief gained momentum. English critics claimed

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that poor relief was ample and freely given, enabling workers to live idly at the expense of a parish. The influential 1834 Report of the Poor Law Commission in England argued that poor relief fostered voluntary unemployment on a massive scale. Even historians of the labor movement, such as the Hammonds and the Webbs in the first decades of the twentieth century, accepted that poor relief had unintended negative effects.\(^{30}\) Polanyi was of the same opinion, but he also drew attention to what was to become a main feature of revisionist literature, namely the economic rationality of poor relief. This revision began in earnest, however, with an article written by Blaug in 1963. Many objections have since been raised to the traditional interpretation of the effects of poor relief. The average value of assistance was so low that it could hardly have been a major disincentive to work. Further, the monitoring of poor relief institutions was so effective that “labor evasion” on a large scale was unlikely. Finally, only specific groups were given relief and in specific economic contexts. In the absence of assistance, wage levels would not have declined nor would the labor supply have increased. On the contrary, part of the labor surplus would have migrated or starved. In order to prevent this migration, higher wages would have had to be paid. Charity did not lead to widespread unemployment, rather, widespread unemployment created a particular kind of charity.

Poor relief could have had at least two other major social consequences. First, it could have stabilized (as it was meant to do) or destabilized the social and political order. Second, it could have helped the poor to survive (if assistance was sufficient), forced them to migrate or starve (if too meager), or even attracted numerous immigrants (if too generous). Thus charity could have increased the number of the poor. In addition, medical aid could have helped paupers, especially children, to survive, thus swelling the ranks of the poor.\(^{31}\) Poor relief also had consequences for the education and spiritual well-being of the poor, and their attitude toward family life, sexual relations, and hygiene.

A number of theoretical ideas and empirical findings from studies in the fields of history, social science, and welfare economics can be integrated into a simple model of how poor relief functioned in preindustrial societies (Fig. 1). The model takes as its starting point goal-oriented behavior by groups of social actors interacting with other groups and with society as a whole. It has been assumed that, by and large, two groups of actors operated purposefully in the field of poor relief—the elites and the poor. Poor relief is viewed as a control strategy of the elites and as a survival strategy of the poor. Each chose the most rewarding alternative from the range of choices that were available to the group, and their choices were conditional on the choices of other groups. The nature of poor relief was the outcome of this interactive bargaining process. Preindustrial poor relief was just one strategy of control that was open to the elites, and one strategy of survival that was available to the poor. The functioning of poor relief was thus dependent on their mutual cooperation, and had to be in the interests of both parties if it were to be effective.

The existence of poor relief was profitable for European elites in five ways: economically, socially, politically, medically, and morally. Welfare economics demonstrates that rational members of a social group will not necessarily purchase a public good, even though the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs. There were three potential incentives to do so: social standing, furthering political careers and patronage, and eternal salvation.

The second party involved in poor relief was the poor. Many Europeans lived below the poverty line. In order to survive, they drew on a number of survival strategies, profiting from charity in three ways: it helped them to survive; it provided them with medical and educational assistance and the means to religious improvement; and a small number of those from the middle class who had fallen on hard times used relief as a way to preserve their class status.

Over the course of time, the consequences of poor relief could change both the societal contexts in which it operated and the elements with which it interacted (these feedback loops are indicated with arrows in Fig. 1). First, charity influenced the behavior of elites and the poor; the nature of relief influenced their choice of strategy. Second, charity affected society as a whole. It could regulate or deregulate the labor market, increase
Fig. 1 A Simple Model of the Functioning of Poor Relief in Preindustrial Europe

**SOCIETAL CONTEXT**
- preindustrial economy
- weak national and strong local influences on poor relief
- highly unequal distribution of economic, social, and political resources

**INTERACTION SYSTEM OF POOR RELIEF**

**Actors with Interests**

**Elites:**
- regulating labor market
- stabilizing social order
- averting turmoil
- reducing risk of infection
- civilizing the poor
- status
- career and patronage
- salvation

**Poor:**
- money and goods
- facilities
- shame-faced poor:
  - staying in own class

**Alternative Ways to Act**

**Choice by elites from alternative control strategies, among others**
- increasing wages
- employment projects
- food subsidies
- police action
- dispensing poor relief

**Choice by poor from alternative survival strategies, among others**
- pawning
- migration
- begging
- prostitution
- crime
- revolt
- accepting poor relief
- mutual societies

**Exchange of poor relief package for desired behavior**

**EFFECTS OF POOR RELIEF**
- increasing or decreasing the number of poor
- (de)regulating the labor market
- (de)stabilizing social order
or decrease the number in poverty, (de)stabilize the social order, and affect the behavior of the poor.

The simple model outlined here is, in a sense, artificial, in that it is based on a synthesis of literature which is both incomplete and diverse and which relates to many different localities and periods. Only detailed empirical studies will reveal whether such a synthesis can provide an adequate analysis of the functioning of preindustrial poor relief. Those studies may also help us to answer other important questions, such as how the elites were able to dominate social policy; what the role of the middle classes was; how many and what kinds of poor people made use of poor relief; and the value placed by the poor and the elite on relief as a strategy compared with the value of other strategies.