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'Welfare for whom?' The place of poor relief in the theory and practice of the Enlightened absolutist state

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Mandeville's disruptive 1723 *Essay on Charity and the Charity Schools* is the most challenging and startling contemporary perspective on poor relief, one which then went on to set up a debate for or against the view that the utility of the labouring poor and a low-wage economy were essential to economic flourishing and national greatness:

> The more man's knowledge increases in [civil society], the greater will be the variety of labour required to make him easy. It is impossible that a society can long subsist, and suffer many of its members to live in idleness, and enjoy all the ease and pleasure they can invent, without having at the same time great multitudes of people that will condescend to be quite the reverse, and by use and patience inure their bodies to work for others and themselves besides. Obsequiousness and mean services are required ... they are never so cheerfully nor so heartily perform'd as from inferiors … a wise legislature would cultivate the breed of them with all imaginable care.[1]

But while this dynamic clearly had a shaping influence within the Enlightened discourse of political economy, it is less clear that it weighed heavily on the minds of policy makers in the absolutist states of Continental Europe for whom the scope and outreach of government itself, and the broader meaning of collective 'welfare', presented more pressing problems. Did those governments offer any serious theoretical or practical initiatives that focused on alleviation of poverty in concerted fashion? Or were such measures mere wishful thinking, examples of the flowers that garlanded those invisible chains that Rousseau suggested bound all social orders? Was a 'society of orders' necessarily, even if unconsciously, founded on an inevitable measure of social degradation by virtue of its fixed stratification that allowed for little or no social mobility? Could alleviation of poverty ever rise to a conscious policy priority given its scale – as Tocqueville asked rhetorically in his *Memoir on Poverty* (1835): 'In a country where the majority is ill-clothed, ill-housed, ill-fed, who thinks of giving clean clothes, healthy foods and comfortable quarters to the poor?'[2]

That is certainly the view argued by historians of a broadly Marxist perspective, such as Perry Anderson and Michael Mann, who have viewed Enlightened absolutism as a necessary failure because of its social contradictions.[3] How could wealth be redistributed and aristocratic power over the peasantry be challenged by those at the apex of the social pyramid without disrupting and demolishing the broad foundation of that pyramid on which that elite rested and subsisted? If the poor were tied into complex structures of agricultural service, fiscal extraction and compulsory military service, all run by local administrative elites on which central government relied, how could the government then unravel a system on which it depended? Did not the fate of Joseph II's reforms prove the point?

I would like to suggest that there is a bit more to it than that, if one disaggregates these issues. It is really important to separate out *two* different sets of priorities in respect of poverty and to assert that they apply in Continental Europe just as much as they do in Georgian England.[4] The first set concerns who should receive relief, and on what terms, and whether that should include or exclude beggars. Linked to that of course is the question of who should then provide such relief – the state, the Church or other sources of secular philanthropy – or some mix of the three. And then alongside that is the second set of parallel concerns surrounding the promotion of national improvement, the boat within which the poor as well as the rich may ideally float upwards to prosperity, albeit on different decks. On this basis the promotion of 'welfare' of different kinds becomes no longer a measure of individual charity but a project of collective utility focused on making the state and its working population as efficient, healthy and productive as possible.

In both these areas, the practice of poor relief and its justification in the absolutist states begin to show movement in new directions in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, including some vestigial but tangible sense that the poor were or could become full citizens at least in an economic and productive sense; and that the obstacles in the way of that outcome both could and should be removed. This is not yet the full moral revaluation and validation of the poor as 'the people', but at least in the aspirations of Joseph II and some of his associates we see traces of this emerging possibility; and it is certainly the case that there is some spill over between these projects and the work of Condorcet and the *idéologues* during the revolutionary decades.

Poverty was hardly a new phenomenon in the long eighteenth century. But there is clear evidence that it worsened in measurable ways across the century, and that this was noticed by contemporaries. The key issues in play were sustained population growth and the huge rise in food prices that this caused. As a result, the ranks of the chronically poor were inflated by

number and degree. As various historians have argued, we see a shift from *structural* poverty, involving the aged, disabled, mentally ill or orphaned members of any given society to *conjunctural* poverty that included the under- or unemployed able-bodied across both town and country.[5]

These were victims of economic instability caused by population growth that productivity could not rise to provide for. While widespread famine was largely avoided except at moments of drastic harvest failure, the phenomenon was widely misunderstood not least because so many officials and writers believed populations levels to be falling rather than rising across Europe. The problems of chronic undernourishment were worst in the countryside where it was harder to measure and assess the scale of the problems. At least in the towns there was more of a focused infrastructure of administration to launch remedial initiatives; but, as Tocqueville records, rural villages were uniquely exposed to both bureaucratic exploitation and indifference:

> In the eighteenth century, a village is a community whose members are all poor, ignorant and coarse; its magistrates are as unpolished and as despised as the inhabitants: its syndic does not know how to read, by himself its tax-collector cannot balance the accounts on which his own fortune and that of his neighbours depend. Not only does his old lord no longer have the right to govern him, but he now considers it a kind of degradation to take part in the government of the village. To assess the taxes, raise the militia, regulate the corvées, these are servile duties, the syndic's work. There is no longer anyone but the central government which is interested in the village, and since it is very far away, and has nothing to fear from its inhabitants, it is only interested in making a profit out of it. Come see now what becomes of an abandoned class, which no one has any desire to tyrannise, but which no one is interested in educating and serving.[6]

As is familiarly known, in the towns, workhouses became the reflexive response for confining and corralling the 'idle' poor; but that hardly spoke to the countryside where such institutions were rare. In Britain there was some understanding of the concept of the 'labouring poor' – in work, but unable to support a family – which became institutionalised through such experiments as the Speenhamland system. But in the absolute monarchies of Europe the issues were still largely seen as moral, with punishment as the first and often only response. Only very gradually and grudgingly was this superseded by a more holistic concern for the health and welfare of the community and, even then, governments struggled to find the right blend of local initiatives and central incentives to make a real difference. Given the inevitable dominance in the countryside of the landlord and the parish priest, more often than not reform in this area was bound up with the success or failure of measures to bring the nobility and clergy more under the fiscal and administrative outreach of the state.

One area where the administrative state, rather than philosophers, broke new ground was in *counting* the poor, or at least attempting accurate statistics on poverty. Gregory King in Great Britain initiated a census of the poor, taken further by the Board of Trade; and in France there were regular surveys making use of the unique vantage point of the intendants in French provincial society. This was a step towards regarding the poor as a collective social category within the remit of the state, rather than a set of atomised individuals in need of specific and piecemeal religious charity.

While the Enlightenment never entirely broke free from the moralising view of poverty or attained a clear understanding of its causes, it did contribute significantly in other respects to recategorise it as a secular issue. Many writers redefine the language itself. Increasingly discussion is framed in terms, not of charity expressing the religious piety of the donor motivated by a desire for God's blessing, but *bienfaisance*, a wholly secular category of wishing to do good to other human beings.[7]

This more secular and scientific perspective follows through into the way in which these institutions for the poor are to be run and funded. In his article on hospitals in the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot makes it clear that these institutions should only be occupied by the genuinely sick, with the structural poor and indigent cared for at home instead. Moreover, he stated in the same article that the funding of these institutions should come from the redistribution of Church lands rather than state or private funds, thus making an early link between Church expropriation and social policy that was to be delivered at the end of the century.[8]

That said, for the most famous *philosophes*, poverty was not in the main a priority for discussion. It mattered more to those like Turgot or German cameralists, such as Justi and Sonnenfels, whose work was closely connected with administration, fiscal issues and wealth creation. Voltaire's *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* contains, in contrast, several dismissive remarks about the poor, whether about accepting the inevitability of poverty or the need to maintain it if workers are to be held to their work.[9] Nor does he take the issue further in *Candide*: while there are attacks on slavery and many social injustices are attributed to the practices of the Church, little is said about poverty in the abstract or particular.[10] Similarly, in *Émile*, Rousseau does not take the opportunity to make the poor the likely beneficiaries of his scheme of 'natural education'. While there are peasants who appear in the book, they have little agency and are marginal to the arguments. He appears to take the view that education is an irrelevance to the poor, rather than a potential ladder out of their poverty.

An important response to Mandeville's challenge about the relation between the poor and the state comes indirectly in Turgot's famous essay '*Fondation*' from the *Encyclopédie*. Writing in 1757, and also focusing on

charitable giving, he acknowledges that the key defect of state policy on welfare was that it was reactive and fragmented, and based on traditional notions of moral economy that were worse than useless in a modern commercial society. By simply reacting on an *ad hoc* basis to grain shortages, by providing relief for mendicity as it occurred, the state tackled symptoms rather than causes and, in some respects, did more general social harm than it gained credit for incidental good. Relief of dearth may have responded to traditional Christian notions of charity and good works, but in seeking to replace the traditional and sporadic role of the monks and the churches in this area, the state was reading the broader problem incorrectly. Removing the obstacles to industry constituted the core of true welfarism, which would ultimately ameliorate poverty through removing the obstacles to wealth creation and implicate the poor as consumers as much as creators of prosperity.[11]

He goes on to offer a long analysis of the way in which wide access to charity in Spain and parts of Italy had led to further immiseration, a rise in the numbers of beggars, a decline in the numbers of the active labour force and ultimately to de-population, and concludes as follows: 'What the state owes to each of its members is the destruction of obstacles which might hinder them in their industriousness, or which might trouble them in their enjoyment of the fruits which are the reward.'[12] There is therefore a way for the poor to escape poverty, which is partly to dismantle the many restrictive and arbitrary practices of *ancien régime* administration so as to enable economic growth and the broadening of the social pyramid; but it is also a matter of working to improve the setting of their lives in the form of public works and institutions of broad social benefit.

This is a perspective that combines economic theory with a great confidence in the capacity of good administration to overcome the notorious problems of legal implementation within the *ancien régime*. We see both its possibilities and limitations working themselves out in the French debates over the so-called *dépôts de mendicité*, which Turgot sought to reform in his brief administration at the start of Louis XVI's reign. It was felt that government compromises, hostility to the *intendants* and local fears of the disruptive potential of beggars had served to neuter the more humanitarian goals of *bienfaisance* and proto-utilitarian concepts of citizenship that lay behind the original imposition of the system. What Turgot sought to do was to set up cooperation between local parishes and the agents of the state. Cases of genuine hardship would be tackled locally through alms bureaus promoted by the *intendants* or the Church, and appropriate residential arrangements should be made for genuine invalids and children. The able-bodied beggars should be put to work in creating useful manufactures, especially clothing, so that they could gain skills and

contribute to the overall welfare of society. Thus, he sought to distinguish the genuinely needy from idle vagabonds and resolve the paradox that lay at the heart of mendicity – the requirement that it be stigmatised as voluntary immorality, while still making provision for those who quite clearly did not choose to be beggars.[13]

Unfortunately, these reforms largely came to grief in the failure of his *Six Edicts*. As so often in Enlightened reform projects, progress in one area was dependent on parallel progress in others before implementation could be sustained overall. Workhouse reforms required a new municipal structure, and once that failed as a result of opposition from a constellation of the usual suspects of vested interests in the church, *parlements* and other local layers, then the prospect of a new pattern of poor relief driven by Turgot's vision of administrative Enlightenment died with it. However, it should be said that many of the experiences gained by those involved in the management of the depots did filter through to the Committee on Mendicity created by the Constituent Assembly in the revolutionary years. A statement of obligations to provide both work and relief for the poor even made it into the 1793 constitution.[14]

Despite the focus on solving specific local problems, there is a common determination among practical reformers from the 1760s onwards in promoting welfare that ultimately also promoted wealth. The end of a generation of European warfare and the abolition of the Jesuits created a set of practical circumstances conducive to a focus on welfare, education and the sources of domestic prosperity. We can see this emerging at the theoretical level in the debate over the morality of luxury and consumerism and the (alleged) leisure preferences of the poor. This was in a way a debate that played one aspect of Mandeville's thought (the beneficial role of luxury) against another (the need to keep the poor in immiseration). Certainly, in England the balance of the debate in both philosophical and official circles ended up endorsing the view that even on narrow commercial grounds the poor too could become consumers who would stimulate demand through their own spending.[15]

With the effective end of feudal structures of mutual obligation, it was no longer clear who had the legal responsibility to take care of the poor anymore, and especially the rural poor. While the government may have grandly taken upon itself that obligation in theory, in some countries it was hard to see how this could mean much in practice without deliberate fostering of local structures that could channel what funds were sent from the centre for relief of the poor. This problem was particularly apparent to former *intendants*, such as Turgot, caught in the crossfire, and a manifest concern to those who called themselves cameralists and had a commitment to *Polizei*.

This last is one of those elusive concepts that has to be understood in particular context if it is to have meaning. While at one end of the spectrum it could mean direct methods of social discipline, it could as often be deployed in a philanthropic sense. Both state and local administrations across Europe had to respect or at least pay lip-service to the web of traditional expectations of support that E. P. Thompson usefully defined as the 'moral economy of the crowd', and there is often little distinction to be drawn between what we would call humanitarian motives and the management of human resources.[16] As Johann von Loen wrote, 'If a prince wishes to keep his forests in good condition, he must watch over them attentively and have good care taken of the saplings. It is just the same with the plantation of human beings: it requires protection, attention and care, if it is to thrive and prosper.'[17]

This in turn implies that a lack of clarity is inherent in the concept of *Polizei*, its particular categories varying according to what is identified as specifically missing in local examples of *Glückseligkeit*.[18] As Justi states in the preface to his large textbook, cameralism is 'the science whose object is the constant maintenance of an exact correspondence and relations between the welfare of individual families and the common good'.[19] That balance requires constant adjustment, which helps to explain how hard it is to pin down motivation and intention in social reform inspired by cameralist sources, which can seem both hard-heartedly driven by statistics and empathetic to local grievances in rapid alternation. But either way it implied top-down regulation rather than trusting to local administration to come up with answers on its own.

If one compares the many texts of political economy that emerged from the middle decades of the eighteenth century, what becomes clear is that whether they are labelled cameralist, or physiocratic or neither, there are several common themes arranged around the promotion of welfare. But it is more the welfare of the community than the rights or benefits of the individual that is the focus. Measures to boost population, improve public health, translate agricultural manuals and implement their proposals, together with plans to reduce or abolish tariffs and tolls and improve communication links, are presented as reforms that will benefit the utility of the whole community. Legal codification is part of the story too, as is the extension of new court structures into the localities staffed by civil servants rather than the local elite. Those goals apply equally to educational reforms. Abbot Felbiger, who advised both Frederick and Catherine II, was certainly determined that school curricula should become more practical, useful and uniform; but what ultimately mattered was that the skills taught reflected the economic needs of the state rather than any sense of social mobility or fresh aspirations for the pupils beyond the level to which they were born.[20]

State emulation and consolidation plays its part too, as rulers competed to attract skilled immigrants, subsidise the production of particular local luxury goods and trades and discover new resources to be mined and land to be taken into cultivation. All measures that claimed a patina of welfare also had behind them aspirations that were natural to the Enlightened absolutist state: the extension of uniformity and state authority in place of a merely theoretical claim of sovereignty, and the displacement of magnate control by the state's own agents. In the larger states, the poor could be forgiven for preferring the older system in some respects, when the state's newly enhanced presence and greater efficiency led only to a higher level of exactions.

Perhaps it was better to be poor in a small German principality run by a high-minded prince-bishop with few secular ambitions, or in a port city such as Hamburg where the city authorities were able to coordinate a community-wide cameralist response? In the latter, a Patriotic Society was founded in 1765 to debate measures on poor rates, workhouse foundation, pension schemes and new vocational training. Considerable funding was needed to bring this about, but even in the disrupted revolutionary decade at the end of the century the public health system and poor relief measures that were implemented lasted well. Teams of officials covered different areas of the city systematically, and the city fathers took on the direct administrative tasks involved in the schooling of the children of the poor, relief for beggars and new labour initiatives. This collective, coordinated and well-funded initiative showed that it was possible to move beyond piecemeal and unpredictable religiously inspired philanthropy, but only where there was a secular will to involve and potentially benefit the whole community.[21]

Of course, that was a single, tightly defined urban example, hard to replicate within the largest Enlightened absolutist states. If we turn now to offer a brief survey of the position of the poor in Prussia, Russia and the Habsburg Monarchy, and the measures taken on their behalf, we see not only much more difficulty in coordinating the centre and the localities, but also some revealingly sharp distinctions within the broad cameralist framework of economic analysis.

Frederick II was certainly the least responsive on these issues, largely because the particular military–fiscal complex of the Prussian state made it essential for the monarch to support the local nobility in their multiple roles in the army, administration and management of local agriculture. There were measures of poor relief and agricultural improvement on the Crown estates where the monarch had freedom to experiment; and traditional notions of *Polizei* – 'moral economy' – insured that grain stores were maintained in all main garrison towns against the possibility of harvest failure and dearth. There were also measures to promote a healthy and

larger population. But poverty, its causes and handling, was not a popular or favoured topic in the debates and lecture series of the Academy of Sciences in Berlin.

As so often is the case with Frederick II, there is a gap between the theory and rhetoric on the one hand and the measures implemented on the other. He offered several denunciations of serfdom which raised hopes that when he was free from the distraction and alternative focus of the wars of the 1740s and 1750s he would take action to shift the balance of power in the countryside. The test of these aspirations came after the end of the Seven Years' War, when suddenly there were no obstacles any more in the way of a focus on domestic reforms. But when Frederick moved to abolish serfdom in Pomerania, as part of his plan for post-war reconstruction in a particularly damaged province, his cabinet order was simply ignored without repercussions by the Junker aristocracy.[22]

The structure of rural poverty was too closely enmeshed in the pattern of military procurement that required both aristocrat and serf to double in army roles. Dismantle one, and the other became equally infeasible. It is true that the loss of free labour service on already marginal noble estates was also an issue, as Frederick himself admitted: '… in wishing to abolish at a stroke this abominable system, we would entirely overturn the agricultural economy, and it would be necessary to compensate the nobility, in part, for the loss of revenues it would suffer'.[23] But this was a matter of resources, whereas the structural links between serfdom and army service were the essential framework of the Prussian state, which no monarch could afford to disturb.

There were a few other measures that might have improved matters at the margins, if Frederick had been willing to allow the peasants to purchase noble lands, and if he had encouraged more social mobility to and within the towns. But his social conservatism ensured the towns remained essentially providers of services to the armed forces with little or no free agency. The best that could be achieved was to improve the legal standing of the peasants on the Crown estates by granting secure tenancies and trusting to the self-interest of the aristocracy in supporting healthy peasants who were also required to be effective soldiers.[24]

For Catherine II, the policy outcomes were broadly similar but arrived at by a different route. There was no chance at this stage of the Russian peasantry, whether Church, state or noble, becoming a major player in economic growth as producers or consumers; so instead the government tried to foster the emergence of a new urban culture which ultimately might act as a counterweight to its reliance on the aristocracy. In one of her memoranda written for discussion with Diderot, Catherine dismisses the poor in the following terms:

> As for the common people, all they think of is the bread that nourishes them and the religion that consoles them. Their ideas will always be as primitive as their nature. The prosperity of the state, progress, the next generation, are words which cannot affect them; they are connected with society only by their hardships, and of all that vast period of time which is called the future, they never conceive of anything except the next day. They are deprived by their poverty of a loftier interest.[25]

Diderot, needless to say, did not share this perspective. In both his conversations with Catherine during his stay in St Petersburg in 1773–1774, and in his subsequent *Observations on the Nakaz*, he argued that future state prosperity depended on widening the ownership of land and giving the peasants fresh incentives to labour. In section 82 of the *Observations*, he takes specific issue with the Mandevillian perspective that only repressive means including perpetuated poverty could compel the serf to accept the reality of his serfdom:

> I personally heard this appalling stupidity spoken by a provincial Intendant … that the condition of a peasant was so painful that only extreme poverty or the fear of death could keep him in it. Public minister though he was, he still did not know that no danger or work frightens a man when he is compensated by the result … It had never entered that minister's mind that in all professions the income which makes it possible to obtain help takes away the fatigue; and that callously to exclude the peasant from the class of landowners is to halt the progress of the first of the arts … He governed a province and knew nothing of man.[26]

That said, much of Diderot's energy in the *Observations* is directed towards refutation of the Physiocrats, so the general drift of his remarks on poverty tends towards a critique of their view that the opulence derived from removing restrictions on free trade, especially the free trade of grain, would itself resolve the problem of poverty. Without a thorough revolution in property holding, that, Diderot thought, would indeed be cold comfort for the peasantry.[27] If it is the case that 'property alone opens the door to cultivation of one's intelligence, talents and tastes, which in turn provide the qualifications necessary for citizenship', then that means education is vital as a means of transforming social attitudes in this direction.[28] Though the *Observations* marked Diderot's increasing disillusionment with the possibilities of reform from above through Enlightened absolutism, he did continue to contribute to the cause of educational reform in Russia promoted by General Betskoy.[29]

In the wake of the Pugachev Revolt the era of 'blue skies' thinking represented by the *Nakaz* came to an end. There was to be no significant reform of serfdom thereafter. Instead, Catherine refocused her attention on creating a new corporate structure so that by accelerated *fiat* she could

bring into being a 'society of orders' that had taken centuries to evolve in the West, thereby creating the intermediate structures which could ease the task of implementing central government policy in the provinces. This would serve to capture the kernel of Montesquieu's thought which had been a key aspect of her preparations for the *Nakaz*. Within the structures of the *Statute of Local Administration* (1775) and the *Charters for the Nobility and the Towns* that followed ten years later were contained many initiatives that were of lasting relevance to alleviating the impact of poverty, though the final charter devoted to the peasants, which would have had most salience to the relief of poverty, was ultimately never promulgated.[30]

As noted at the start of this chapter, we need to distinguish between grand policy towards poverty and changes and adjustments to welfare on the ground. Russia is a case study where separating out the two strands offers rather different perspectives. Hartley, Dixon and Madariaga have shown in several recent studies that an apparent focus on other priorities at the top did not prevent significant changes at the bottom.[31] While these measures mattered most to Catherine for purposes of uniform government and regular, standardised administration, it was the structures dealing with primary education, welfare distribution and regular justice that made more difference to the practical lives of peasants and townsfolk.

There were substantial initiatives in creating foundling homes in the main cities, drawn from German models, though mortality rates remained as high as in other European cities.[32] There was a serious attempt to replace Church welfare provision after the secularisation of Church lands in 1764; and in the wake of the 1775 Statute new boards of public welfare were created on the same template in every Russian province, coordinating administration of hospitals, alms houses, asylums and orphanages and schools. Careful thought went into the modelling of these institutions – there was an initial grant of 15,000 roubles to every board, but each was encouraged to act in an entrepreneurial fashion in coordination with local elites, inviting top-up charitable donations and also offering loans to promising local initiatives. Further funding for schools came in the 1780s.[33]

As with so many early modern initiatives in the area of welfare the question immediately arises of how much difference these measures made. Were they dissipated and neutralised in the sands of local indifference and corruption, or did they bring about lasting changes? The results seem to have been mixed, with more promising outcomes, as you might expect, in St Petersburg, Moscow and Kiev, and fewer in rural provinces. One aspect that receives surprisingly little attention in the literature is the reluctance of many of the intended beneficiaries of welfare to come forward to receive it, whether in terms of placing orphans in schools or foundling hospitals, or in accepting hospital care in place of home remedies. It was not simply a matter

of state underfunding – take-up and suspicion of state-sponsored initiatives remained endemic.[34] In some ways this should not surprise us, especially in the Russian context, where the peasant commune was constructed to be a self-sufficient structure suspicious of outside initiatives which were familiarly focused on conscription or fiscal exactions.[35] Even attempts through a land survey to rationalise agricultural practices on Catherine's own estate at Tsarskoe Selo in 1772 ran into problems that anticipated the kind of opposition to change that Joseph II experienced in the Habsburg lands during his own later abolition of serfdom.[36]

As so often in early modern welfare policies, the fundamental problem lay in a lack of coordination not just between central and local institutions but also between the various key objectives of state policy. For example, the acquisition by the state of Church lands at the start of Catherine's reign (ratifying a policy initiated by her predecessor) provided a uniquely resourced opportunity to open up a free market in land that could potentially have transformed the productivity of Russian agriculture, while also yielding the state a substantial windfall income as lands were sold off. However, the exigencies of the Turkish War of 1768–1774 ensured that the government simply subsumed the Church lands into its own portfolio, spending the income on financing war, with only a small fraction returned to the Church to fund philanthropy.[37]

Nevertheless, a corner had been turned. Catherine had fulfilled the undertaking made in the *Nakaz*, that the state and no longer the Church had the primary responsibility for the care of the elderly, the chronically unwell and orphans. Given the obstacles facing any attempt at the reform of serfdom, welfare was an area where progress could reasonably be made, and to an extent was. In some respects, Catherine restated traditional nostrums, including an equivocal view of mendicity – suggesting that the genuinely destitute should be cared for while the physically capable should be made to work. But in the language in which welfare was discussed there was now a clear humanitarian purpose and aspiration, even if it is at times tempered by a moralising determination to use labour, whether voluntary or compelled, to improve and correct the behaviour of wayward individuals. As Hartley states, 'It could be said that the provisions on welfare institutions in the Statute on Provincial Administration reflect both the influence of the Enlightenment – in establishing state, secular, responsibility for the aged, sick and insane, and in the humanitarian and moral ideals put forward – and the features of the *Polizeistaat* in its regulatory nature.'[38]

It is in the Habsburg Monarchy that we see the most sustained effort by the central government to alter the practice of poor relief and to reconceptualise the place of the poor in society. There were two reasons why this was more fertile ground for change. First, the state simply had more

discretion to act – the landowning class was not so embedded in the state apparatus in the way it was in Prussia and Russia and the civil service was in large measure independent of it. Despite the lack of uniform control over its disparate territories, there were greater opportunities for a sustained 'welfarist' programme to stick. Second, the existing system of poor relief and education rested much more heavily on the Church and the monasteries and religious brotherhoods than was the case elsewhere. Once the Jesuit order was suppressed in 1772 and the programme of monastic closures began to gather pace, something inevitably had to be done to reconstruct the foundations of poor relief as well.

As early as 1771, in a letter to Maria Theresia, the Emperor sketched out the possibilities that such redistribution of assets might open up – 'what funds would be available for foundlings' homes, orphanages, correctional institutions, workhouses, penitentiaries and hospitals in which young people would be brought up as true Catholics and members of the state ... orphans would be provided for, the idle removed from society, the wicked punished and rehabilitated, and finally the weary and aged provided for'.[39]

This was coupled, as I have indicated, to a more elevated sense of how the poor might be integrated into the body corporate of society. In the introduction to his charter abolishing serfdom in 1785, there is already a clear statement that national improvement and development of civic rights go hand-in-hand:

> We understand and recognise that improving agriculture and encouraging enterprise are the two best methods of achieving [the happiness] of the peoples subject to us, but that it is impossible to bring this about unless personal freedom, which belongs to every man by nature and according to the state, is granted to the subjects in general, and the right to own property which they occupy … is assured and consolidated.[40]

Though ultimately reversed, this document was a harbinger of things to come, not least in its assertion that freedom was granted both by nature *and* the state.

While responsibility for the most important initiatives rests with Joseph II, crucial steps were also taken during the preceding co-regency with his mother, Maria Theresia. From the mid-1760s onwards, when one ministerial generation gave way to Kaunitz, Sonnenfels and others receptive to new ideas, state social policy coalesced around an agenda that prioritised population growth, agricultural improvement and manufacturing enterprises based on import-substitution. The fact that neither of the co-regents espoused interest in the theory of cameralism did not mean that they were not fully on board with a pragmatic cameralist agenda in line with their overarching desire to apply uniform governance to the disparate domains

of the monarchy. This can be seen most clearly in the agrarian reforms in Bohemia in the 1770s.

Discontent in a number of provinces focused attention on the most onerous aspect of serfdom, namely the *Robot* or *Urbarium*, which required peasants to work a specified number of days without reward on the landlord's estate. Rather than tackle the overall institution of serfdom, attention focused instead on setting up procedures whereby the peasants could negotiate new labour contracts with the nobility with a variety of ceilings set by the government. Additionally, the state official F. A. Raab pioneered a system on royal estates whereby the peasants could commute their labour obligations for a cash payment instead, leading ultimately to secure leases on the land. These measures did not challenge the balance of power in the countryside, but still introduced a new flexibility into labour relations. The government's role remained one of light-touch enforcement and dispute reconciliation. Given the dangers of pushing the nobility too far and risking revolt or refusal to pay taxes, this was perhaps the best incremental progress that could be achieved in the countryside, and similar *Robot* patents were extended to most provinces.[41] Unfortunately, this was not enough for Joseph II, when he was free to act alone.

One result of this commutation of labour days was that peasants were able to supplement their income from local manufacturing projects. Such cottage industry began to flourish after the *Robotpatent* because it could operate free of urban guild regulation and draw on a labour force galvanised by a desire to earn money to enable early marriage. With these incentives the population of Bohemia rose by up to 50 per cent in the later decades of the eighteenth century whereas in the other Habsburg lands the increase was only 10 per cent. And all this had come about without pushing the nobility too far – indeed they had benefited from the greater productivity of a freer and freshly incentivised peasantry.[42]

Joseph's measures to abolish serfdom gathered pace during his ten years of personal rule. It is important to note that the actual abolition of serfdom was one of only several measures that were aimed at reconfiguring the social order; nor was it necessarily the most important. Abolition changed legal status and facilitated labour mobility; but it has to be seen as part of a broader whole, where the chief goals were to alter the fiscal foundation of the state and extend the outreach of central government into the countryside. The attacks on the *Robot* system extended commutation of labour days outside the Crown lands and required the nobility to accept cash or crop alternatives, and to have peasant tenants on demesne land who would be paid a wage. The final straw – for the nobility – was the Tax and Agrarian Regulation of 1789, which undertook to reduce taxes on peasants to a maximum of 30 per cent, all to be assessed on a new universal cadastre.

While not identified as a physiocratic measure, in essence this was the single land-tax espoused by Quesnay and Turgot for France in the 1760s. It aimed both to liberate peasant productivity and the public treasury simultaneously through simplifying tax collection for the state. This was cold comfort for the nobility across all regions of the monarchy for whom potential increases in agricultural productivity counted little against the actual and keenly felt loss of property rights in the here and now. Ultimately the economic wisdom of this approach could not be assessed as Joseph postponed its implementation until late in 1790, by which time he had died. His brother was quick to reverse the policy and return to the incremental supervisory role that had worked well enough during the co-regency.[43]

These major institutional measures to ameliorate rural poverty and raise agrarian prosperity were only part of the story and have to be seen alongside the more successful attempts to redistribute wealth from the abolition and sequestration of the monasteries.[44] These funds remained in the first instance in the religious sphere – for the payment of pensions, the funding of parish reorganisation and the creation of general seminaries to train priests, seen as crucial to the continuing provision of primary education, something of clear and central relevance to the poor. Though there were ironic exceptions, such as the maintenance of the mendicant Franciscans on account of the quality of their pastoral work, despite Joseph's desire to outlaw elsewhere the very mendicity on which the order was founded.[45]

As we move towards the later years of the 1780s, it was the aftershock of abolition for other religious institutions that brought the practical results of Joseph's religious policies to bear on the towns and villages of Lower Austria and the parishes of Vienna itself. The suppression of religious brotherhoods brought in a huge sum – there were reckoned to be over 4,500 in the central lands of the Monarchy, and those in Vienna were worth around 700,000 florins alone. Half of the assets were assigned to a new *Institute for the Poor* whose role was to organise and supervise both poor relief and education using existing parish structures. This relied on the parish priest and other local officials to decide on the sums appropriate to each individual and to administer the handouts usually at a specific church service each week. Direction of the project was entrusted to a Bohemian nobleman, Count Buquoy, who had pioneered a similar scheme a decade earlier on his own estates. He had been heavily influenced by the writings of Muratori, and particularly his view that religious faith and practice should be built around practical altruism. Each week a collection was to be taken in the parish for the poor, with the levels of support decided by the parish priest and a couple of other local notables and administered in church. The poor were to be graded according to four levels of indigence, and the biggest daily pay-outs amounted to a third of a labourer's weekly wage.[46]

A number of features stand out in these measures. Joseph's rebranding of the parish clergy as agents of the state demonstrates again how expanding the state's role into religious and educational affairs was all of a piece with this attempt to rationalise poor relief. More evidence of this resides in the fact that the scheme was extended in 1786 beyond Christian parishes into the Jewish community of Prague as well. Also, it is clear that this kind of enterprise relied and built upon existing structures rather than new bureaucracies. So, it had economies of scale, though with significant imperial oversight. There was also a new element of moral control apparent as well, in that the behaviour of the poor was now likely to be influenced by the attitudes of those responsible for deciding pay-outs.

Registration of all recipients implied a degree of social control too, and the role of the parish priest, now officially a state servant, in coordinating both welfare and education linked these reforms to Joseph's other great redeployment of Church resources, namely primary education, so that the poor could gain the skills for advancement in society as well.[47] One other lesson that seems clear is that such reforms had a much better chance of grafting successfully in an urban setting where there were clearly articulated parish administrative structures already in place. These are top-down paternalist measures *par excellence*, but they do indicate at least a utilitarian valuation of the potential contribution of the poor within society; and though much of Joseph's work perished with him, these elements continued into the Napoleonic era, as did the enhanced parish primary education system.

The Institute for the Poor and the experimental prototype that preceded it have received little study to date, but they are representative of the best that the Enlightened absolutist state, amid all its contradictions, could provide as an approach to poor relief. Moreover, it is a rare example of a reform scheme that emerged from below rather than from above, and which was then co-opted by the administration in Vienna and repurposed more generally. As Paul Bernard has shown, the aristocratic estates of Bohemia were essentially self-governing and thus well placed to innovate on their own terms, drawing on the older paternalistic views of charity but revitalising them with new cameralist rigour.[48]

While we should not idealise their practices or motivations, it is a reminder that the aristocracy were by no means obscurantist opponents of reform: self-interest and genuine humanitarian concerns could join forces in promoting a more healthy and productive work force with an adequately calibrated system of poor relief. Beales concludes: 'In working out his plans he [Buquoy] saw the parish as the unit, and the parish clergy as the instruments of both education and poor relief. This was just the mix of religion and economics, utilitarianism and benevolence, high mindedness

and practicality which appealed to many of the most responsible landlords across Europe.'[49]

It is in this instance, perhaps, that continental thinking and practice in respect of the poor most closely approached the blend of public and private, state and local initiatives that characterised the differently configured approach to the poor in England. Neither approach ever successfully reconciled the tensions between provision for the genuinely indigent and the danger of encouraging the very leisure preference that the system was intended to prevent; nor did either system overcome the difficulties involved in linking local and central government to produce an efficiently delivered level of support. But at least by very different routes there was a common recognition of the challenges involved.[50]

Despite its sometimes patronising tenor, the combined demands of international state building, national self-improvement and a desire to rationalise and recalibrate mendicity led to several developments in absolutist states that anticipate and indeed fed into revolutionary and nineteenth-century innovations and discourse. It may not have been possible to reform the structures of wealth creation in the countryside, but it was now clearer who was considered deserving of charity and who not, and how ideally the poor should be integrated into society as productive members rather than simply stigmatised by exclusion.

Notes

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