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## CIRCUMSCRIBING THE CONCEPT OF POVERTY

In this paper I propose to discuss the difficulties of defining the concept of poverty in such a way as to make it applicable to the variety of situations in Europe between 1400 and 1800. While very different conditions certainly did exist in this vast area during those four centuries, there are also some important features in common: by comparison with our modern world, early modern society undoubtedly shows relatively large homogeneity. Historians have more often than not adopted the criteria and definitions they come across in their sources. Now, since the nature of these data was so very varied, the results they produced were confusing – the variety seemed to prevent them from drawing any general conclusions<sup>1</sup>. Must we then confine ourselves to describing individual cases? Since we may dismiss the alternative, that of producing impressionistic generalizations, as unscientific, what conceptual tools does the historian of poverty have at his disposal?

The problem is definitely related to the quality of the source material and the very incomplete stage research has reached. But surely it is equally essential to be aware that we are always presented with preselected documents. Contemporaries defined poverty, implicitly or explicitly, following the conventions of the institution they belonged to. These choices have inevitably left their mark on the observations of historians.

The tax inspector determines the level of tax allowance and exemption, but will he use the same method a year later? Will his successor apply the same criteria? Local authorities and central government will undoubtedly encourage their officials to be more demanding during difficult periods, etc. The accounts and cartularies of charitable institutions give us more information about the wishes of donors than about the numbers and living conditions of the poor. In

the same way, other kinds of source material raise the question of how representative the poor they mention are. With wills, and other documents concerning transactions resulting from death, for example, it will always be difficult to determine the population strata and land area that came under the jurisdiction concerned. In every case there is an unquestionable part of the population that remains beyond our ken.

This, surely, is the reason why the data and figures produced for the poor from studies covering a very wide area and over a long period are in effect so varied, indeed confused. M. Mollat gives the example of the so-called 'fiscal poor': the results are figures ranging between 10% and 80% of the poor<sup>2</sup>. Can we take this indicator as a sufficiently solid basis for a comparative analysis? Studying in detail the tax surveys made before compiling the list of hearths in the Low Countries during the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries has shown the extent to which the criteria the tax authorities used differed from one locality to the next and how easily errors in transcription and standardization could be made when the final document was being drafted<sup>3</sup>.

The registers concerning direct personal taxation have also been studied for several towns. Here, too, it has emerged that even within the space of only a few years the differences are considerable<sup>4</sup>. If it is difficult comparing documents of a similar nature, then it is plainly hazardous to compare documents of a different kind. As far as I know nobody has yet managed to identify, using other sources, more than a third of the people mentioned in a tax register.

The sources, therefore, present us with groups of people who have been labelled 'poor' according to criteria that are often vague and that always vary according to the people, the institution, the period and obviously the place. In order to evaluate definitions found in the source material, the researcher must develop for himself a general definition of poverty.

Just as it seems to me important both to quantify and to generalize in any historical study we make on the standard of living, it is essential that everyone apply the same methods in defining the concept of poverty. If not, we risk falling into several traps, not only using common usage from the present and the past where the word 'poor' has several meanings, but also of applying the numerous criteria used by the authorities in defining poverty as best suited them.

I wondered whether we might turn for help to the social sciences, as being more conversant with concepts than history. They, however, cannot provide ready-made solutions: they too present us with an almost total lack of accepted opinion. This was stated again in the E.E.C. report on "The perception of poverty in Europe"<sup>5</sup>. The authors chose a relative definition: a poor man is a person whom the other members of the same society *regard* as having less means than is considered normal.

This definition may be useful in sociological studies such as those commissioned by the European Community, but it is not appropriate to historical research where this type of subjective information is impossible to obtain in meaningful figures. Furthermore the lack of an objective and general criterion hampers comparison.

A number of economists and sociologists advocate the use of the national income (per capita) of the whole population or a fraction of it. With this as our criterion we could identify that part of the population which benefits relatively too little from an increase in the standard of living of a given society. Even if it were possible to work out the income per capita in Early Modern societies, applying this method would lead one up against certain limitations. Its merit is above all to trace developments in income distribution within a society where production methods and state mechanisms for income redistribution change rapidly. On the other hand this method tells us nothing about the absolute standard of living and does not therefore lend itself to international or cross-cultural comparisons. Nevertheless historians might well benefit from following a statistically defined group of people through time, where documentation is sufficiently plentiful — for example, the material and numerical development of the 50% less rich members of a certain community. At the same time we must not lose sight of the fact that it is the researcher who determines the group in question in an arbitrary way, except when he can resort to a statistical criterion (but this, too, should be related to a real standard of living).

A more classical method is to fix a minimum standard of living by referring to a package of what is considered basic expenditure. Very good examples of this kind of study are those done by Charles Booth for London about 1900 and by Seebohm Rowntree for York in 1900, 1935, 1950<sup>6</sup>. A package of this kind, meticulously put together, consists of the absolute minimum level of basic foods as well as expenditure on accommodation, clothes, etc. — this, too, taken at

the simple survival level. It offers the great advantage of introducing an objective and relatively general element into the research. However, a package put together in 1900 for an English industrial city could not be applied as it stands to an early modern peasant community or to a town in the Third World of to-day<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand the principle behind it still seems valid, especially as it provides the authorities with a tool that is both scientific and easy to use. The *poverty threshold* might be equated to a sum of money considered to be the minimum amount necessary to survive. In the U.S.A. it was not until the urban unrest of 1965 that the Social Security Administration incorporated other criteria than an annual income of 3,000 dollars in the threshold, notably the number of people in the household and the lifestyle, urban or rural.

If we wish to introduce the notion of a 'poverty threshold' into a historical study of Early Modern societies, as a more objective measure than those in the sources, we must still take into account a series of variables. First, the 'package' of essential goods and expenditure must obviously be based on the production system and consumption habits of the society in question. The results of the empirical studies for different areas and periods done by Abel, Labrousse, Phelps-Brown and Scholliers produced a 'typical budget' that has now become classical. Food accounted for 70 to 80% of expenditure for a typical family of five, the father being a builder's labourer; bread alone, in normal times, took up 44% (between 35 and 50%) of income<sup>8</sup>. Making use of these averages does not, however, relieve us of the need to take into account the violent fluctuations in the price of cereals.

On the other hand, income is derived from the levels of wages and employment. The former is, generally speaking, well known; the latter is difficult to find precisely<sup>9</sup>. For the Low Countries it can only be calculated in very general terms from the figures for industrial production and trade in towns. Thus income appears to be very closely linked to population growth in town centres. If a large number of workers continually fail to find employment, they become impoverished. *After a timelag* which is precisely the residuum of poverty, this situation causes a drop in the population curve by producing a rise in the rates of mortality, celibacy and emigration. Only then does the number of the deprived decrease, without however alleviating the misery of those that remain.

The method which seems safest in our opinion to use for Early

Modern societies is that which indicates the number of years, taken over a long period, a typical family spends in poverty where the average income and expenditure are known, given a certain number of working days. De La Roncière applied this method with success for Florence in the 14th century and others have followed his example<sup>10</sup>. Although uncertainties remain as to the actual number of workers living under those conditions, the employment level and the possibly special situation in the building trade, figures so obtained are a standard for general use and suitable for comparisons.

At this point we must point out how fundamentally different industrial societies are from pre-industrial ones and how difficult it consequently is to apply sociological concepts just as they stand. Today we can measure the level of aspirations different classes in a society have; it is changing rapidly, due to psychological pressures (advertising) and economic ones (purchasing power and market supply). The way a situation is seen has an important role to play, apart from the objective facts. The E.E.C. report brought to light that although in Ireland in 1976 income per capita of the population was the lowest in the Community, people's awareness of their poverty was less than the average of the nine countries. Although it is impossible to estimate the level of aspirations for Early Modern societies, the researcher must take it into account if he wishes to use the method of poverty thresholds. Clearly no universal criteria exist: the same basic human functions are catered for in different ways depending on available technology.

What conclusions can we draw from all these reservations?

1. As an indication of how I wish to use a clearly defined concept, I propose to introduce the term 'deprivation' in place of poverty, a word charged with too many impressionist meanings. We can further distinguish between:

(a) 'absolute deprivation': having no means of obtaining those goods and services that, at well-defined levels of aspirations and technology, cater in the best possible way for all basic functions of life. This definition covers much more than Booth's or Rowntree's, notably taking a level of what is considered culturally and socially normal and including *all* human physical functions, among them the living conditions needed to maintain full physical and mental health;

(b) 'relative deprivation': the feeling, created by the norms

and values that predominate in a society at any given time, of being *unable* to attain a standard of living and degree of involvement in affairs that are regarded as normal or desirable.

2. These two categories of 'deprivation' are by no means fixed and depend on technological, economic, political and psychological factors.

3. Europe from 1400 to 1800 provides an economic and cultural framework sufficiently homogeneous for working out poverty thresholds as working hypotheses, e.g. for the industrial and agricultural sectors. Adopting Mr Abel's calculations, it would be possible to decide on a maximum percentage of the budget to be spent on food, say 70%. If food expenditure exceeds this figure then we shall be dealing with absolute deprivation. Of course, the composition of the family will be taken into account, and the ages of its members (life cycle).

4. A study of poverty must, to a large extent, cover the welfare policies of authorities and the attitude of the better off. The institutional measures, as well as current position with regard to donations, foundations, etc., should be considered in relation to the level of urban development and the degree of governmental organization. The confusing divergencies remarked upon at the beginning of this paper might be partially explained by the different phases of growth and varying economic situations existing between towns, regions and countries<sup>11</sup>.

5. It is to be hoped that within the framework of coordinated research work — a great deal can be learnt here from the brilliant work done by Mr Mollat's team —, we can try and formulate a model of those economic and demographic factors as well as the social, political and psychological ones that influence the degrees of 'deprivation' and the ways they are perceived.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> M. Mollat, *Les pauvres au moyen âge* Paris, 1978

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pp 282-286

<sup>3</sup> W. Blockmans & W. Prevenier, "Poverty in Flanders and Brabant from the Fourteenth to the Mid-Sixteenth Century Sources and Problems" (*Acta Historiae Neerlandicae*, X, 1977), pp 33-39

<sup>4</sup> Ph Wolff, *Les "estimes toulousaines" des XIVe et XVe siècles*, Toulouse, 1956, A Higounet Nadal, *Les comptes de la taille et les sources de l'histoire démographique de Périgieux au XIVe siècle*, Paris, 1965, J Favier, *Les contribuables parisiens à la fin de la guerre de Cent Ans*, Geneva Paris, 1970, Studien betreffende de sociale structuren te Brugge, Kortrijk en Gent in de XIVe en XVe eeuw, I III (Anciens Pays et Assemblies d'Etats LIV, LVII, LXIII), Heule, 1971 73

<sup>5</sup> H Riffault & J R Rabier, *The Perception of Poverty in Europe* (EEC Commission Working Document V/171/77 E), Brussels, 1977

<sup>6</sup> Ch Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, London, 1902, S Rowntree, *Poverty A Study of Town Life*, London, 1901, idem, *Poverty and Progress*, London, 1941, S Rowntree & G R Lavers, *Poverty and the Welfare State a third social Survey of York*, London, 1951

<sup>7</sup> Cf P Mathias's severe criticism of the sweeping generalisations made from pseudo exact calculations for so called 'vital necessities', in his "Adam's Burden Diagnoses of poverty in post medieval Europe and the Third World now" (*Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, LXXXIX, 1976) pp 149 151

<sup>8</sup> W Abel, *Massenarmut und Hungerkrisen im vorindustriellen Europa*, Hamburg, 1974, pp 395 396, E Labrousse, *Esquisse du mouvement des Prix et des revenus en France au XVIIIe siècle II*, Paris 1933, pp 595 597, E H Phelps Brown & S V Hopkins, "Seven Centuries of the Prices of Consumables Compared with Builders' Wage Rates" (*Economica New Series*, XXIII, 1956), pp 296 314, E Scholliers, *Loonarbeid en honger De levensstandaard in de XVe en XVIe eeuw te Antwerpen*, Antwerpen, 1960, pp 161 167, 207 208

<sup>9</sup> H van der Wee, *The growth of the Antwerp market (14th 16th century) I*, The Hague, 1963, pp 540 43, J P Sosson, *Les travaux publics de la ville de Bruges, XIVe XVe siècles Les matériaux Les hommes* Brussels, 1977, p 232

<sup>10</sup> C M de La Ronciere, *Pauvres et pauvreté à Florence au XIVe siècle* (in M Mollat [ed ]), *Etudes sur l'histoire de la pauvreté*, II, Paris, 1974), pp 674 ff, W Blockmans & W Prenter, *op cit*, pp 28 29

<sup>11</sup> This is the thesis of C Lis & H Soly's impressive book *Poverty and capitalism in pre industrial Europe*, Hassocks 1979