POVERTY and SOCIAL RESPONSE

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Impact of Agriculture Hunting and gathering groups could be poor, for example if hunting opportunities decreased because of some environmental change; or if population pressure affected a group. But there was usually little internal economic inequality; ethics of sharing were vigorous and standard. Dilemmas might arise for the elderly, who could no longer support themselves. But systematic internal poverty, measured against overall group standards, was rare. This situation changed, though probably gradually, with agriculture. For most people, wellbeing now depended on access to land, either through ownership or paid employment for labor. But various groups – for example, younger children in families that had produced too many offspring – might lose secure access to the land. Problems might increase as powerful landowners took over large estates, potentially reducing access still further for some. Hence, poverty. This was one reason, in some societies, that some people sought enslavement, as a protection against landlessness; one reason, as well, that prostitution emerged very early in cities – designation as the world's oldest profession is not entirely inaccurate. Agriculture results, furthermore, were often cyclical. It's been estimated that local famines struck about every seven years. Here was another source of at least recurrent poverty, with the landless, or near-landless, the most vulnerable victims. Wars could also devastate the countryside, for most armies during the Agricultural Age lived off the land. Finally, life chances might generate poverty: loss of a husband/father could be devastating, and widows and orphans were characteristically among the poorest groups. Handicaps, from birth or accident, might also push people into poverty. The elderly more generally could be an issue, depending on willingness and availability of family support.

Responses Different regions developed different kinds of responses to poverty. Almost always response was conditioned, first, by the fact the agricultural societies generated relatively little surplus and, second, by widespread belief that social inequality was normal and that some degree of poverty was part of this framework. In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, families reached out to protect other members to an unusual degree: when a husband died, a brother might be urged to marry the widow; extended families cared for widows and orphans more generally. Family solidarity was less marked in Europe, but some families, both in Europe and Asia, set up investment funds to take care of poorer members, into posterity, at least by the postclassical period. Many peasant villages, for example in Europe, retained common lands, which provided opportunities for the landless to hunt, gather wood, win some support. Urban guilds in many regions tried to support members who fell ill, and also widows and orphans. In many societies, again particularly from the postclassical period onward, hospitals were established, sometimes by religious organizations. While they offered some health care they also served as places where the elderly who lacked family support could go, win some support, and ultimately die.

Charity The most common response to poverty during the Agricultural Age, beyond extended families or specific organizations like guilds, involved charity. This assumed that poverty was incurable, and indeed ordained by God; but that more fortunate people had some obligation to help those in need. Cities, in this framework, frequently filled with beggars, including many deformed by accident or illness. But more systematic efforts emerged as well. All the major religions urged charity, and tried to help organize it. Hinduism and Buddhism channeled some charity to ascetic holy men or monks, who were voluntarily poor. Islam was particularly focused on charity, citing this as one of the five basic religious obligations and establishing the zakat as an annual alms tax. Many wealthy Muslims also gave endowments for poor relief (waaf), directing the funds from a landed estate or investment to support hospitals or almsgiving. Eastern Orthodox Christianity also promoted alms, and Catholicism, perhaps somewhat less systematically, also encouraged giving to the poor or the establishments of institutions such as hospitals. Catholic churches and monasteries often donated up to 25% of their funds to poor relief, and both Christian and Buddhist groups operated some orphanages. (It is worthwhile to note the opposition to infanticide, from most major religions, had as a logical corollary some effort to help abandoned children.) In China the government, partly to compete with Buddhism in the postclassical period, set up some granaries to provide food for the urban poor in bad times. To be sure, religions might also urge that the poor had particular opportunities for virtue, as in Christian belief that the rich might have a harder time getting to heaven. But the charitable response was widespread even so -- indeed, as a means for the wealthy to compensate for their fortune by displaying virtue.

The Early Modern Period Poverty began to take on some more clearly novel elements from the 16th century onward, as commercial activity accelerated in many regions. There was more pressure on people without land or

regular jobs. China, for example, began to require tax payments in silver by the later 17th century, which was a huge hardship for groups that had little or nothing to sell on the market. Population growth in some cases added to the problem. In Britain, both in the 16th century and again in the 18th many large landowners won government approval to enclose their estates, usually by growing hedges around them; peasants who could not afford this simply had to sell out, becoming landless laborers. Even within villages and guilds, growing commercialization, competition, and quest for money earnings pressed traditional recourses for the poor. Many European villages, for example, began to try to divide up the common lands, to the benefit of peasant landowners. Overall, in many parts of Western Europe, up to 40% of the rural population had lost regular access to land by 1700, creating a growing group of rural poor some of whom began to seek assistance in the cities. In the Americas, the spread of disease, serfdom and slavery produced new levels of poverty, for many export activities depended on cheap, ill-treated labor. The rise of manufacturing, in Asia and Europe alike, created new risks: sales of Chinese silk generated profits, but when demand fell many domestic producers, landless or nearly so, had no clear alternatives. Finally, in some regions, essentially as part of the growth of commercialization, attitudes toward the poor also began to change. More and more European authorities, including local community leaders, began to talk about "undeserving" poor, who had only themselves to blame for poverty and who should not be assisted. While Protestants maintained some Christian charity, they often associated solid earnings with God's favor and abolished earlier institutions, like monasteries, that had played a crucial role in poor relief.

Impact of Industrialization On the whole, and in the long run, industrialization reduced poverty and/or redefined it, in the societies most directly involved. Historians once bitterly debated workers' standard of living in early, particularly British, industrialization. It was not clear that wages kept up with costs, and urban housing was often expensive. But there is no question that, within a few generations, most people began to benefit from higher production levels. They might still feel poor, in relation to other groups, but their diets, household supplies and clothing improved. Yet there were new problems. Industrial work caused more accidents, which could end or limit earning capacity. Older workers found it difficult to keep up with the pace and strength demands of factory labor. Periodic economic downturns threw many people into poverty, with workers pawning their possessions or struggling to find other ways to survive. And older problems – for example, with widows and orphans – did not decline. Finally, industrialization, by expanding cities, made urban poverty more visible and pressing, creating fears of more riots or political disruption. (Rural poverty may have increased even more, as factories reduced opportunities for domestic manufacturing, but it tended to be ignored amid rosy optimism about rural life.) In this situation many industrial governments, after initial hesitation, began to experiment with new approaches. Famously the German leader, Bismarck, in the 1880s introduced the first state-sponsored efforts to provide insurance against illness, unemployment and old age; the initial measures were limited, but the principle of state responsibility began to spread more widely, and would expand further in the 20th century. Welfare reforms reflected a sincere desire to reduce poverty, but also a prudent response to fears about the rise of socialism or other radical options. Charity did not end with the emergence of welfare programs, but concern about creating undue dependence – a belief that more poor people should learn to take care of themselves – counted to mount as well. Similar tensions arose in industrial Japan: the government began to offer some new poor relief after 1874, but hostility to the "immorality" or irresponsibility of some of the poor grew as well.

Global Impact Industrialization, often along with rapid population growth, created new levels of poverty in many nonindustrial parts of the world. Domestic manufacturing was hard hit by European factory competition: in the early 19th century tens of thousands of rural women workers lost their jobs in India and Latin America. Within the nonindustrial regions, export competition – for example, in coffee growing or hemp manufacture -- created more and more pressure to lower wages, for both rural and urban workers. In many European colonies – for example, in Africa – Europeans forcibly removed many natives from their land, creating their own estates instead. In many colonies, both in Africa and Asia, European governments raised taxes, trying to recoup their expenses but violating local standards in the process and forcing more people into poverty. Overall, regional poverty levels began to expand noticeably. In 1800, the average Mexican had a standard of living about 2/3 that of his or her United States counterpart; in 1900, the ratio had fallen to 1/3, both because Americans had on average become richer, and because Mexicans had become poorer. Population pressure added to the problems in many regions: Chinese population grew by 200% in the century after 1750, but the amount of arable land increased by only 35%.

The Contemporary Period: The Framework By the early 21st century about 14.5% of the world's population was listed, by the United Nations, as desperately poor – earning $1.25 or less per day. Dire poverty, in other words, remained a huge problem. Regional variations were extreme. About 46% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa

fell in this category, 24% in south Asia, but less than 10% in East Asia, Latin America and less than 2% in Europe. Almost certainly, then, along with the persistence of extreme poverty, overall levels had declined, despite massive global population growth. Greater industrialization, for example in places like China, India and Brazil, was most clearly responsible for this change, combined in some cases (as in China and Latin America) with reduced rates of population growth. During much of the contemporary period, some established industrial societies also expanded efforts to alleviate poverty through welfare measures. Scandinavian countries responded to the depression of the 1930s by increasing unemployment coverage; they, and also the United States, set up social security programs to provide pensions to retirees, and this ultimately pulled most older people out of the poverty ranks in industrial societies. The communist regime in Russia worked hard to assure, and require, full employment. Tremendous strain accompanied Soviet industrialization, particularly among the peasantry, and standards of living remained low; but outright poverty probably did diminish. Amid these various changes, emphasis on traditional forms of charity probably declined, though religious support, particularly in Islam, remained strong. New levels of humanitarianism generated responses to particular disasters, like earthquakes. But for persistent poverty attention now shifted to support for further economic development, rather than direct assistance to the poor. This was the main thrust of new international agencies such as the World Bank.

The Mixed Picture Debates about poverty became more complicated at the end of the 20th century. In several key countries, like Britain and the United States, welfare measures were peeled back, though not eliminated, in favor of encouraging economic growth and cutting taxes. Even in other parts of Western Europe, which remained more wedded to a welfare model, new discussions emerged. In this climate other countries, eager to push economic development, also reduced direct support for the poor – for example, in India. In several countries – particularly when economic growth declined, as in the global recession after 2008 – the result was a growth in the poverty group, even if overall standards of living continued to gain. In the United States, for example, 21% of all children by the early 21st century lived in families under the nationally-defined poverty line. The end of European communism stripped many groups – for example, retired pensioners – of established levels of support. In many countries not yet fully industrialized, furthermore, the 20th century had seen a distinctive pattern of poverty urbanization: more and more people, in the Middle East and Latin America, have flocked to cities even though there were no steady jobs, simply because of population pressure in the countryside. Many cities were thus ringed with slums, even as the commercial core seemed to prosper. This pattern was beginning to emerge in Africa as well. And while global standards of living had improved, in many countries – both industrial and industrializing – internal economic inequality was increasing, reflecting new gaps between rich and poor. Finally, the contemporary period was dotted with regional disasters that massively increased poverty: wars and civil strife, and hordes of property-less refugees, strained resources in many areas. Officially, world leaders remained committed to ending global poverty, a huge change in attitudes from pre-modern times – though also reflecting a new kind of hesitation about traditional charity. Prospects, however, remained mixed.

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Read "The Objective Value of Social Settlement." (1893)

"Trade Unions and Public Duty." (1899)
"Neighborhood Improvement." (1904)

Suggested Reading:

Poverty in World History. By Steven M. Beaudoin (Routledge, 2006).

A Poverty of Rights: Citizenship and Inequality in Twentieth-Century Rio de Janeiro. By Brodwyn Fischer (Stanford University Press, 2010).

Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History. By Alice O'Connor (Princeton University Press, 2002).

Discussion

1. How did people accumulate wealth differently in early agriculture societies? What gave rise to social inequality?

2. Compare the approaches the major religions took to poverty: are similarities or differences more significant?

3. In the Agricultural Age, what role did the state play in charity? How did this compare to the role of religions?

4. What forms did charity take in the early modern and modern period? What groups was charity aimed at?

5. What groups participated in charity? How did the poor organize to improve their economic standing?

6. How did industrialization change poverty and approaches to poverty? Were the changes substantial?

7. What factors impact 20th century poverty? What role does globalization play in this?