Mendicant Men

Discipline- and Workhouses in the 16th Century

Andrew Pfannkuche
Richard J. Soderlund, PhD.
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> You often say, "I would give, but only to the deserving." The trees in
> your orchard say not so, nor the flocks in your pasture. They give that
> they may live, for to withhold is to perish. - Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

There seems to be a universal truth that the rich love to blame the poor for their own destitution.

One need look no further than certain 'news' channels to observe this phenomenon play out in

the contemporary United States. However, it is easy to forget that this is not new. For centuries

those in power have been blaming the 'undeserving poor' and 'sturdy vagabonds' for their own

destitution, claiming they were simply idle and did not wish to work. This is also an issue that

historians face. As Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly pointed out in 1982 "...historians too have the

inclination to analyse poverty as an external phenomenon and to represent its external

manifestations as characteristics of the poor themselves."[1] While historians do not have the

ability to act on this analysis, there are those who can, and when they do, it results in horrible

conditions for the impoverished.

When asking the question, *what causes poverty*, elites and early modern humanists had to

make assumptions. Many came to rely on a premise perpetuated in the medieval world: that the

poor were that way by choice. As such it is only logical to then ask: how can one cure poverty if

it is the fault of the impoverished? To early modern humanists like Dirck Coornhert, Thomas

More, and Nicholas Ridley, as well as civic leaders like Nuremberg's Paulus Koler, the answer

was simple -- discipline. It is during the 16th century that strict and unyielding discipline was

introduced into the lives of the European poor, and provided for the creation of institutions called

discipline houses. Referred to as *tuchthuizen, hôpitaux généraux,* houses of correction,

zuchthäusern, or *rasphuisen*, these institutions laid the foundation for the expansion of

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[1] Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism in Pre-Industrial Europe: Pre-Industrial Europe 1350-1850*
(Brighton: Harvester Press Limited, 1982), xii.

discipline, not just on 'sturdy beggars' but for all those unfortunate enough to be saddled with poverty.[2]

But why was discipline -- and quite literally imprisoning the poor -- seen as the best solution to poverty? Why was it considered necessary to imprison the poor in the first place? And was it ideological or practical forces that drove the creation of what French Historian Michel Foucault would term "The Great Confinement"? Even though the concept of forcing people to work has been around since time immemorial -- Early Dutch humanist Dirck Coornhert would actually use the example of slave labor on Spanish galleys to support his arguments -- the idea of using social engineering and forced labor to end poverty was something wholly new.[3] Joel F. Harrington argues that implementation of discipline houses was not ideologically driven, as it has been previously viewed by historians, but as an expression of 'bureaucratic momentum,' which was the developing bureaucracy adopting new roles due to improvements in efficiency over the 16th century, allowing bureaucracies to 'catch up' with ideological jumps that had already been made.[4]

These ideological jumps have often been attributed to the Protestant Reformation. However, historians have recently begun to change this view and Harrington's argument is a perfect example. He argues that houses of correction were not a result of the Protestant Reformation, but rather a 'bureaucratic momentum' where the bureaucracies of different European states and localities would act in order to fulfill the ideological objectives that they were previously unable to act upon. While it is correct that discipline houses and later

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[2] Ibid., 117.

[3] Henk Bonger, *The Life and Work of Dirck Volkertszoon Coornhert*, translated, annotated and edited by Gerrit Voogt (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 258.

[4] Joel F. Harrington, "Escape from the Great Confinement: the Genealogy of a German Workhouse", *The Journal of Modern History,* volume 71, issue 2 (June, 1999), 318.

workhouses were originally accepted in Calvinist, Reformed, and Anglican areas, it "does not explain the eventual popularity of workhouses in Lutheran and Catholic localities, nor does it offer any evidence or explanation for the immediate motivation and timing in the opening of a workhouse in a given city."[5]

The origins of these ideological jumps lie in the late feudal period and early modern period where by the mid-16th century European nobles found they had a crisis on their hands. Rapid change during the late medieval period was exacerbated by the breakup of the feudal system, the increase of manufacturing, rising food prices, and, at least in England, the fact that foodstuffs were becoming less and less valuable.[6] Lis and Soly link the rise in poverty to a general crisis between 1350 to 1450 in which 30 to 35 percent of the European population died due to "Catastrophic death and epidemics [that] were accompanied by long and devastating wars… Innumerable villages were abandoned and massive migrations took place."[7] Things became worse over the succeeding decades. In the 1520s revolts broke out like the *Bauernkrieg* (the "Farmers War") in southern Germany and Alsace as well as the Pilgrimage of Grace in England, and severe unrest across the Netherlands.[8] By the 16th century, Europe was a continent in total crisis.

This calamity was aggravated by the methods early bureaucracies used to combat poverty as "there was apparently no such thing as a governmental policy on poor relief anywhere in Europe. Begging and almsgiving… were… left to individual ad hoc contributions and local ecclesiastical administration."[9] Helmuth Schlue also notes that when governments did try to

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[5] Ibid., 314.

[6] E.M. Leonard points out how in England sheep had become even more profitable than corn (wheat) during this period. E.M. Leonard, *The Early History of English Poor Relief* (New York: Barnes & Nobles Inc., 1965), 14-17.

[7] Lis and Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism,* 26.

[8] Ibid.*,* 85.

[9] Harrington, "Escape from the Great Confinement", 315.

combat poverty and "proletarian mass criminality," they did so by enacting repressive laws against beggars and by driving them away.[10] Rather than helping the situation, it only served to make things worse, as the poor were confined to starving in private with no form of relief available to them. In Nuremberg, a law of 1370 required beggars to register with the local government in order to receive a badge meaning it was legal for them to beg. This law is important as even in 1370 one can see the distinctions between the 'worthy' and 'unworthy poor,' showing how poverty was characterized throughout the 16th century and beyond.[11]

According to this law, there was a difference between the "worthy" and "unworthy" poor, which was defined in two ways. The first distinction was between those who were residents and those who were non-residents (*Schutzverwändten*). This division was exacerbated by the German idea of the *Gemeinschaft,* or the community. As such, the 'sturdy poor' from the city had an easier time with the begging police (*Bettelstreifer*) than outsiders.[12] That is not to say that those from the *Gemeinschaft* had it easy. On the contrary, after the town council centralized almsgiving in 1522, 'sturdy beggars' became ineligible to receive alms.[13] This contributed to the establishment of the other distinction between 'sturdy beggars' and beggars in 'actual need'. The mythical 'sturdy beggar' was a man, often criminal, who was perfectly capable of working but chose to live as a leach on the economy and act as a dreg in the shadows of society. The legitimate poor were orphans, widows, and others who simply could not work to make their own living. This idea also reveals the sexist nature of the times as it was assumed that a woman couldn't work for herself and would not commit crimes.

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[10] Helmuth Schule, *Die Geschichte des Bonner Zuchthauses und des Bonner Artbeitshauses* ([S.N.], 1957), 5.
[11] Harrington, "Escape from the Great Confinement", 320.
[12] Ibid., 322.
[13] Ibid., 322.

This fear of "proletarian mass criminality," as Schule called it, was one of the key

motivations for the wealthy and powerful to attempt to address poverty. During this period the

official punishment for crimes such as robbery, theft, and other property offenses in England was

death.[14] Elites of this era saw a direct line between poverty and begging that would eventually

lead to criminality -- the Foucauldian "great fear" -- and as such, any means that could be used to

prevent these crimes were greatly appreciated by those with property seen to be under threat.

This is where the origins of using discipline to prevent poverty lie: in the idea that if one can be

convinced to make an honest living they will not turn to begging and eventually crime. This idea

came about across Europe, but its first real mention, is as will be for the rest of this story, with

the English.

In 1517 the English statesman Thomas More wrote about a perfect society called *Utopia,*

a vision of a perfect world. He discusses "idlers and sturdy beggars," declaring,

> And when they have wandered abrode tyll that be spent, what can
> they then els doo but steale, and then justly pardy be hanged, or els
> go about a beggyng. And yet then also they be caste in prision as
> vagaboundes, because they go aboute and worke not: whom no man
> wyl set a worke, thoughe thei never so willyng profe themselves
> therto.[15]

What More is calling for is the enforcement of discipline on the poor, which was intended to

prevent crime and criminality by being simultaneously be preventative and rehabilitative.[16] This

concept was preventative as it was assumed those who would commit crimes, the so called

"vagabond, idlers, and sturdy beggars" and their children, would be locked up and unable to beg

and steal while at the same time it was rehabilitative by inducting those into the benefits of work,

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[14] Leonard, *The Early History of English Poor Relief,* 57.
[15] Thomas More, *Utopia,* translated and edited by Churton Collins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), 33.
[16] Harrington, "Escape from the Great Confinement," 330.

mainly not being forced to work.[17] One can see this idea coming from religious authorities of the era as well. Even though More was Catholic, he would find himself agreeing with the likes of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, to whom, "... idleness was harshly judged; its opposite, work, was 'saintly'."[18] More was early in his call for discipline as England was not yet struck with the worst of the century's social upheaval, such as the Pilgrimage of Grace. But because More was early in his calls for the use of discipline, one can see that the ideological pieces were already in place for the establishment of workhouses. All that was required was a bureaucracy able to act.

While More may have been ahead, it did not take long for other Europeans to begin considering the implementation of discipline. In 1567, Dirck Coornhert wrote his famous *Bouventucht*.[19] Although not published until 1587, the book shines an important light on how the ideological elements of poor relief developed during this period. Coornhert argues that the repressive measures taken by rulers like Charles V -- banning begging and almsgiving, for example -- were only serving to make revolt more likely. Coornhert proposed his own solution for the punishment of beggars and vagabonds: "a punishment that would be more bitter than death itself" - forced labor.[20] For most of his book, Coornhert focuses on idleness, harkening back to previous concepts of monastery life when monks would work all day as idle hands were traditionally seen as the devil's playthings. What is intriguing about this conception is that the cause of idleness is seen as poverty rather than the opposite, as it was assumed in the medieval world that the poor were *paupers Christi,* following the way of Jesus, which is to say that elites assumed the poor were that way by choice.[21] As such, Coornhert promoted "useful work" and

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[17] Leonard, *The Early History of English Poor Relief,* 65.
[18] Lis and Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism,* 86.
[19] Translated as "The Discipline of Knaves" by Lis and Soly. Lis and Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism,* 118.
[20] Henk Bonger, *The Life and Work of Dirck Volkertszoon Coornhert*, translated, annotated and edited by Gerrit Voogt (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 258.
[21] Lis and Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism*, 20.

surveillance of the poor.[22] Coornhert's call for the enforcement of discipline on the poor is another example of how the elites, concerned about revolts, attempted to find a way to suppress the poor.

Another example of the drive to enforce discipline occurred in Nuremberg in 1588 and Harrington describes it at the start of his article. A town councilman, Paulus Koler, proposed that the only way to deal with 'sturdy beggars,' both local and alien, was to lock them up in a house of correction, or *Zuchthaus*.[23] What is important about this proposal is the timing and the reason it was rejected. Koler proposed this in 1588, one year after *Bouventucht* was published, and the probability of him having read the Dutch book is rather small. The fact that this proposal was made when it was shows that the idea of enforcing discipline on the poor via houses of corrections was not the idea of a single individual but a logical outgrowth enforcing discipline. The fact of the timing means that others had this idea as well but not the means to execute it, as in the case of Nuremberg.

The proposal was rejected in favor of adjusting the methods of policing of begging, as the bureaucracy of Nuremberg could not yet handle the creation of a *Zuchthaus*.[24] It is interesting, however, that this proposal was made in Nuremberg, a Lutheran city -- not a Calvinist, Reformed, or Anglican locality as the traditional history would assert led the way in the creation of discipline houses. This only lends further credibility to the claim that the drive for the creation of discipline houses was based in the advancement of bureaucracy rather than ideology. However, the traditional history is correct in regards to the location of the first discipline house: the palace of Bridewell in London.

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[22] Roger Deacon, "'A Punishment More Bitter Than Death': Dirck Coornhert's 'Boeven-tucht' and the Rise of Discipline", *Theoria: A Journal of Social & Political Theory,* volume 56, issue 118 (March, 2009), 84.
[23] Harrington, "Escape from the Great Confinement", 309-310.
[24] Ibid., 326.

At first glance, it may appear that England was years ahead of the European continent in terms of social policy, but in reality, England had a more developed bureaucracy that allowed for this. Europe's first house of correction was opened in the former London palace of Bridewell in 1553.[25] The origins of this initiative can be seen in the debates that took place in the 1540s and early 1550s. London, which was experiencing rapid population growth, was a city immersed in poverty. Unsurprisingly, it was also the first English city to tackle the problem of poor relief.[26] Covered by several hospitals for different types of the poor and destitute, London would actually have an official poor rate (a tax taken by the propertied in an area in support of the poor) by 1547 in addition to the existing *ad hoc* collections that took place at Sunday mass, but this would not be able to coexist with the emerging ideological notion of enforcing discipline.[27] The King's charge, the Bishop of London, Nicholas Ridley, promoted a more centralized and rational organization of poor relief given that London's hospital system had regular problems of funding and overlapping functions.[28] But Ridley also wanted to test the effects of discipline on the poor, and he would become the leader of a cutting edge movement across Europe.

Appointed Bishop of London in April 1550, Ridley used his position to vigorously campaign for the use of discipline in poor relief via a house of corrections. Ridley wrote to William Cecil, the Lord of Burghley, of the need to establish a new type of hospital "not for the impotent, but for the training, correction, and relief of the able-bodied."[29] Ridley would seize his chance to advance this cause in a 1552 sermon to King Edward VI in which he "spoke much of

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[25] Different sources claim different years for the opening of Bridewell, but all are contained within the decade. 1553 comes out of Alice Rollins Brewster, "Early Experiments with the Unemployed", *Quarterly Journal of Economics,* volume 9, issue 1 (October, 1984), 88.

[26] Leonard, *The Early History of English Poor Relief,* 23.

[27] Ibid*.,* 29.

[28] Ibid*.,* 30-31.

[29] Ibid*,* 31.

the duties and responsibilities of those in high places towards weaker classes." When the King

later asked the Bishop what he felt should be done, Ridley asked to confer with the citizens of

London.[30] These London citizens included the already existing Council of Aldermen and the

current and former Lord Mayors of London, Richard Dobbs and George Barnes. This

prestigious group submitted a petition the same year to the Privy Council. That petition

designated three types of impoverished, including 'sturdy beggars;'

> that the greatest number of beggars falling into misery by lewd and
> evil service, by wars, by sickness or other adverse fortunes, have so
> ugly lost their credit that though they would show themselves
> willing to labour, yet they are so suspected and feared of all men,
> there few or none dare or will receive them to work: wherefore we
> saw that there could be no means to amend this miserable sort, but
> by making some general provision of work, wherewith the willing
> poor may be exercised; and whereby the forward, strong and sturdy
> vagabond may be compelled to live profitably to the
> Commonwealth.[31]

Calling for the establishment of a house of correction or a discipline house, this petition, with its

important caveat that this work was to be "profitable to all the King's Majesty's subjects, and

harmful to none," received critical support from the merchants of London.[32] The next year, the

King would give the palace of Bridewell to the City of London along with a sizable fund to begin

operations. By 1557, Europe's first house of correction would be in operation.[33]

  What is important to understand from this petition is the actual act of begging and the

distinction made between types of beggars. As the petition only refers to beggars it appears that

the citizens of London did not mind the poor who died quietly in a field, as long as it is not their

field. Yet, by dividing beggars into groupings and singling out 'sturdy vagabonds', it is obvious

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[30] Ibid., 32.
[31] Ibid., 32-33.
[32] Ibid., 33.
[33] Ibid., 33-34.

who the elites saw as true threats. To most thinkers during this period, there was a key

difference between the "legitimate poor," widows, and orphans, who could not work and were

reliant on alms and poor relief, and the 'sturdy beggar,' men who could, but would not, work.

Part of this difference is the assumption of criminality. It is a simple, sexist idea: women do not

commit crimes, men do. As such, this is why when Bridewell opened, it was solely for men

whereas women would continue to receive the already existing poor relief for some time

onwards; it was the 'sturdy beggars' that were the problem.[34]

      While London attempted to use preventative measures such as that of Bridewell to deal

with their 'sturdy beggars,' cities like Nuremberg were still using old, reactive punishments.

Starting in the 1580s, the punishment of *opus publicum* had spread from Paris and Rouen via

Strasbourg to the German states, and it was readily adopted by the Nuremberg town council for

use on alien beggars.[35] The punishment of *opus publicum* involves being placed into a chain

gang and forced to work, usually on public works, mainly street cleaning and repairs.[36]

However, as in Paris and Rouen, the city's leaders saw the use of these chain gangs not as

rehabilitation, but as free labor to be exploited.[37] This punishment, however, was for criminals,

not the common poor and as such it wasn't actually meant to be an instrument of social

engineering. The use of this slave labor shows that not all were in favor of creating discipline

houses, rather, this was just one idea that was being suggested at the time.

      Whether an institution is meant to be rehabilitative or not does not alter the circumstances

of those who must actually suffer, and unfortunately these institutions would only gain in

popularity. The Netherlands, which was embroiled in the Eighty Years' War with Spain, was the

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[34] Ibid.*,* 33-34.
[35] Harrington, "Escape from the Great Confinement", 330.
[36] Ibid., 330
[37] Ibid., 330.

first nation on the European continent to embrace the discipline house as an institution.
Boeventucht was published in 1587, and it rapidly caught on in the Netherlands. One year before

Coornhert's death, two of his followers, Hendrick Laurensz Spiegel and Sebastiaen Egbertsz,

convinced the magistrates of Amsterdam of the validity of a house of correction, *Tuchthuis*, for

men.[38] City authorities agreed on one for women in 1596.[39] Colloquially, *tuchthuisen* would

also be referred to as *rasphuisen* as one of the main tasks laborers were forced to perform was

rasping red wood logs as part of the dye making process.[40] It is important to note that the first

continental house of correction was opened in the Netherlands where the bureaucratic

momentum described by Harrington could match the ideological drive to imprison the poor.

Discipline houses quickly caught on throughout Europe after 1589. During the 17th

century, twenty-six Dutch towns would open discipline houses as well as four major German

ports: Bremen (1609), Lübeck (1613), Hamburg (1614), and Danzig (1629).[41] It appears that the

bureaucratic apparatus was already able to enforce discipline in many places and *Boeventucht*

was just the spark needed to light the flame of the Great Confinement. Europe would continue to

march forward as more discipline and discipline houses would be founded over the seventeenth

century. However, England was still ahead of the pack, not only content with enforcing work on

'sturdy beggars' but also on the entire impoverished class of England.

In 1575, the English Parliament passed a statute ordering that "houses of correction

should be provided in each county for punishing and employing 'rouges and unsettled poor'."[42]

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[38] Lis and Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism in Pre-Industrial Europe,* 119.

[39] There seems to be no clear consensus on when it was decided on when the first *tuchthuis* was opened, much in the same was as Bridewell, for the sake of simplicity I have used Lis and Soly as my information mostly comes from them, nevertheless years range from 1589 to 1596 for the men's *tuchthuis*. Ibid., 119.

[40] Roger Deacon, "'A Punishment More Bitter Than Death'", 82.

[41] Dates come from Lis and Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism in Pre-Industrial Europe,* 119-120.

[42] Brewster, "Early Experiments with the Unemployed", 88.

The next year, another statute passed by Parliament ordered that every city, corporate, and

market town was to have work materials so that,

> the Intente Yowthe may be accustomed and brought up to laboure
> and worke, and then not lyke to growe to bee ydle Roges and to the
> Entente also that suche as bee alredye growen up in ydleness and so
> Roges at this present maye not have any juste excuse in sayeng they
> cannot get any Service or Worcke… and that other poore and needye
> persons being willinge to worcke maye bee set on worcke.[43]

The statute also required the building of houses of correction so that those who still refused to

work could be sent away. What these two statutes show is that the ideological and bureaucratic

developments that Harrington prescribed as necessary for the Great Confinement had already

taken place in England. The ideological need which was present across Europe can be seen by

Koler's proposal, Coornhert's *Boeventucht*, and in the English Parliament's statutes of poor

relief. What is important about these proto-workhouses is the fact that they were meant to help:

people would be paid for their work done here, they would be given work if they could not find it

anywhere else.[44] This is not to say that these institutions were the pinnacle of poor relief -- this

was hard labor -- but for those who did not want to starve, it was extremely helpful.

There was no actual development in regards to the workhouse on the European continent

in the 16th century. European bureaucracies were in the midst of attempting to set up a vast

system of discipline houses and had no care to use voluntary workhouses as well. This makes

England unique in the 16th and 17th centuries, as the 1601 the Elizabethan Poor Law would

allow for the entrenchment of workhouses in England that would eventually lead to the famous

workhouses of 19th century England.

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[43] Leonard, *The Early History of English Poor Relief,* 72.
[44] Ibid., 72.

Looking back on the 16th century, one can see key elements play out that charted the course towards the Great Confinement. It was the fear of criminality and the idleness of 'sturdy beggars' that caused fearful elites to consider creating what were essentially jails for the poor. The Protestant Reformation only contributed to this by exacerbating the necessary ideological justifications for the use of forced labor on one's own poor. As the bureaucracies of Europe gained momentum the establishment of establishment of discipline- and workhouses became possible and they were readily adopted at Bridewell and rapidly spread across Europe, especially after *Boeventucht.* In this regard, Harrington's thesis seems correct that it was mainly a 'bureaucratic momentum' rather than ideological forces that drove the beginning of the Great Confinement. However, it needs to be noted that bureaucracies do not just act because they are able to, but rather because there is an ideological drive for them to act. As such blame cannot be solely attributed to the bureaucracies, but to all involved.

All of this leads back to the Kahlil Gibran quote at the start of this essay. Why is it that these European leaders would not help their subjects rather than being benevolent leaders or enlightened monarchs? From this study, the answer seems simple. These elites felt feared the poor and what they could possibly do, especially to their property. As such it only seemed to rational to lock the poor up before they could commit crimes, and a bureaucracy looking to expand its influence was only too happy to help. It is a sentiment that sounds all too modern, and one that will not be leaving the current political culture anytime soon.

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