

Erik Lynch

Dr. Soderlund

HIS 228

20 September 2020

Poverty and Public Policy in the XIX Century: The Case of England

Introduction

After the passage of the 1834 New Poor Law, the existing network of workhouses across England and Wales underwent a major transformation. Institutions that were once local, relatively generous, and understanding became centralized, stingy, and punitive. This fundamental change can be best observed by the mutation of the structure, mechanics, and *élite* attitudes towards the workhouses.

“As Like Prisons as Possible”

The structure of England’s workhouses was radically altered by the New Poor Law. Under the Old Poor Law, workhouses were administered at the county level and managed by parishes. This structure was abolished by the New Poor Law. Parishes were amalgamated into specialized districts for the disbursement of aid, and the whole operation was centrally administered from London. In the words of an Assistant Commissioner of the New Poor Law, “Our intention is to make the workhouse as like prisons as possible.”¹ Structurally, this meant that the workhouses would be overseen in the same manner as carceral institutions. Uniforms were mandated, families were separated into gendered workshops, and the poor who entered were made to live in sparse barracks. All three of these policies were innovations, as under the

¹ Richard Soderlund, *Prompt*, 1.

Old Poor Law a recipient of aid was free to wear their own garments, remain with their family, and, quite often, were not made to live in the workhouse, instead receiving “out relief” in the form of money or grain subsidies. Out relief was any type of assistance that did not require the recipient to enter the workhouse. Out relief was abolished in the New Poor Law, which required all aid to be provided within the confines of the workhouse. This represented the most fundamental structural change in the New Poor Law. The altered structure of the Poor Law system also necessitated a change in the function of the workhouses.

“Terror to the Poor”

The prominence and function of workhouses altered greatly after the implementation of the New Poor Law. Under the Old Poor Law, the workhouse was not the primary method of disbursing relief to the poor. In the new system, out relief was greatly reduced, and the workhouse gained preeminence. An Assistant Commissioner of the New Poor Law noted that, “Our object is to establish therein [the workhouse] a discipline so severe and repulsive as to make them a terror to the poor and prevent them from entering.”² The New Poor Law adopted a punitive, disciplinary framework that the paternalistic Old Poor Law did not possess. The most intrusive innovation of the New Poor Law’s workhouse was the strict, all-encompassing regimentation of time. Inmates worked ten-hour days, six days a week and were required to attend religious services on Sunday morning. Even on their ‘free day,’ inmates were not free to determine when they rested or rose. The labor the inmates performed was repetitive and mind-numbing. Some common tasks assigned to inmates were ‘picking oakum,’ which entailed separating nautical line into strands by hand, breaking up rocks into paving gravel, and turning a

² Richard Soderlund, *Prompt*, 1.

treadwheel, which was a large wheel that rotated by high-stepping onto planks, which were typically not connected to anything and served only to exhaust the inmate. All tasks assigned to inmates were intentionally mind-numbing, alienating, and exhausting. This was a component of the 'workhouse test,' in which the standard of living was kept so Spartan, the work so tedious, and the gruel so thin that only the truly desperate would enter the workhouse. Life in the workhouse was designed to be materially worse than that of the lowliest, most impoverished wage laborer. This was intended by the Poor Law reformers to inspire the poor to work harder and pull themselves up by their bootstraps to avoid the grinding horror of the workhouse. This view of the recipients of aid as lazy good-for-nothings, rather than needy fellow-members of the community, indicates a major change in *élite* views of the workhouse entrants.

Assumptions About the Poor

Under the Old Poor Law, the poor were integral members of the community. Under the New Poor Law, those seeking relief were no longer seen as poor, but as paupers. In the mind of the English gentry, given voice by Edmund Burke, poverty was the natural state of the masses. Their condition was wretched and unfortunate, but it was natural and, therefore, acceptable. This pitiful natural state was contrasted with pauperism, which they saw as contemptible and the result of human indolence. The poor man had a job which did not pay well; the pauper was unemployed. The poor man worked hard to provide for his family what meager scraps he could; the pauper sat on street corners with his hands out, begging to be fed. The poor man was poor by accident of birth, whereas the pauper was such because he was an insufficiently diligent worker. This distinction between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor was a fiction of the aristocratic mind, but its effect on the New Poor Law was real. The focus of the Royal Commission was able-bodied adult male agricultural laborers. This prominence was misguided, as this was a

demographic in rapid decline. It is true that at the passage of the New Poor Law ‘agricultural laborer’ was the most common occupation in England, but there nonetheless existed a burgeoning class of urban proletarians who were essentially ignored in the reformation of the system.

Paternalism, which characterized relief in the old system, was replaced with market logic. Paternalism was a result of the reciprocal relationship between the aristocracy and the peasantry. The rural poor would act deferentially to the aristocracy and owe them a portion of their labor and harvest. In return, the rural poor were given long-term labor contracts and were entitled to relief when they needed it. This entitlement was tempered by the requirement of the recipient to have been born in that community or to have been a productive member of that community for an extended period. This residency requirement was referred to as a “settlement,” and stymied labor migration into the cities. If one had a settlement, it was expected that the aristocracy would take care of the poor agrarian laborer as if he were his son. Under the New Poor Law, this expectation of *noblesse oblige* was abandoned. The imagined subject of relief was no longer a down on his luck neighbor, but a lazy, open-handed pauper and stranger. To receive relief was to insulate oneself against the workings of the free market which, in the eyes of the Poor Law reformers, was an unacceptable infringement of their *laissez-faire* economic principles.

Conclusion

The system of workhouses across England and Wales experienced a major transformation after the passage of the 1834 New Poor Law. Institutions that were once local, relatively generous, and understanding became centralized, stingy, and punitive. The transformation of the structure, mechanics, and *élite* attitudes towards the workhouses best illustrate this fundamental change to England’s approach to the relief of the poor.