

Pauperism, Moral Character, and the Liberal State

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REVIEW ESSAYS / NOTES CRITIQUES

Pauperism, Moral Character, and the Liberal State

Mariana Valverde

Mitchell Dean, *The constitution of poverty: toward a genealogy of liberal governance* (London: Routledge 1991).

Jean-Marie Fecteau, *Un nouvel ordre des choses: la pauvreté, le crime, l'État au Québec, de la fin du XVIIIe siècle à 1840* (Montréal: VLB 1989).

Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Poverty and compassion: the moral imagination of the late Victorians* (New York: Knopf 1991).

THREE MORE DIFFERENT BOOKS on similar subjects could scarcely be imagined. Dean relies almost exclusively on Foucaultian methods and categories but adds a strong gender analysis, while Fecteau's approach is derived from the French neo-Marxist 'regulation school,' which questions the analytic primacy of the mode of production but not that of class. On her part, Himmelfarb praises late Victorian moral/social reformers from a Thatcherite back-to-moral-basics perspective. Reading the three books together produces the intellectual equivalent of the gastric effects of mixing a hot curry with a cream-laden pasta dish, and then following this by a baked Alaska. And yet, under the stylistic compulsion to find or invent a unifying theme for a review-essay, one could argue — especially if one had already developed a critique of political economy for its failure to theorize moral regulation

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and subjectivity generally — that directly or indirectly all three works highlight the need for reflection on categories of social regulation such as ‘vice’ and ‘character.’

This reflection is particularly timely now that the language of moral responsibility is experiencing renewed popularity among politicians, social workers, and educators. In current official and popular pronouncements about ‘values’ it is possible to discern a revival of the peculiar mix of individualism and social interventionism characteristic of the Victorian period. We are told that the state’s ability to help the poor is very limited; we must be individually and collectively thrifty; we must extend a helping hand to the unfortunate, but the aim of all relief is to make people responsible, moral, and economically independent, and therefore there will be no more coddling of those who are “bankrupt in pocket and in character” (a phrase of the Webbs with a great deal of resonance in today’s welfare work). Thus, it might be politically relevant to read all three books as responses to the Victorian truism that moral bankruptcy was at the root of most economic failures, a truism which has left its mark not only on neoconservative régimes but also in the priorities of budget-slashing social-democratic governments.

Let us begin with *Poverty and Compassion*, a sequel to Himmelfarb’s *The Idea of Poverty*.¹ Like the earlier book, *Poverty and Compassion* studies middle-class ideas about poverty in the breezy style of old-fashioned intellectual history, highlighting the ideas of somewhat arbitrarily chosen thinkers (Charles Booth, Arnold Toynbee, Alfred Marshall). The Salvation Army and the ‘model dwellings’ promoters get some mention, but otherwise those involved in practical reforms get short shrift even when they also made theoretical contributions. Traditional practices and ideas (for example, the vast array of Church of England charities) are barely mentioned other than as a foil to the book’s hero, ‘modern’ scientific philanthropy. The social researchers who pioneered urban sociology are presented as primarily moved by ‘compassion,’ as racked by a stern sense of moral duty even as they built their careers by advocating the replacement of ‘indiscriminate charity’ (that is, compassion) by a combination of research, personal advice, and hygienic/moral surveillance. If Himmelfarb attempts to make even the completely lackluster Charles Booth and the decidedly obnoxious Octavia Hill likeable, it is because her avowed aim is to bring back the scientific philanthropy of the 1890s into the social policies of the 1990s. Moral distinctions between the deserving and the thriftless and moral reform as a solution to the evils of slums are described in such a way as to make them appealing to contemporary politicians and social workers. The “morals test” imposed by the English Charity Organization Society (and other Victorian charities and state agencies) should, Himmelfarb believes, be resuscitated: “a means test, judging only the need and not the character of the

¹G. Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty* (New York 1984). This work examined the debates on misery and pauperism of the 1830s and 1840s, in Britain and to some extent on the continent as well.

applicant, leaves open the suspicion that the need is a result of a failure of character; a moral test certifies that it is not." (203)

Character is, for Himmelfarb as for her Victorian heroes, a mysterious essence far more central to relief than mere 'means'; the presence or absence of this essence, furthermore, requires a process of certification by the ruling classes. Those with certified character were known then as 'the deserving' or 'the helpable,' and are now known as 'retrainable.' Then as now, aid is regarded as best restricted to this chosen people, because the purpose of aid is not to provide 'means' but to re-create the mythical state of 'independence' assumed to be natural to the pre-pauperized poor.

Himmelfarb is here adding her voice to the growing chorus denouncing universal social programs, but she is not content with Mulroney's tactic of bringing back the means test. The means test helps to trim down state expenditures; but (as Mitchell Dean remarks) for many liberals as well as conservatives, cutting down on the size and cost of the state was a means more than an end in itself. The end was to use charity, and state relief when absolutely necessary, as a lever to moralize the poor, to form their inner being and to ensure the continuous reproduction of 'good character' from generation to generation.

Foucaultian historians of the welfare state, including Dean himself, Jacques Donzelot, and Giovanna Procacci, have recently argued that the social interventionism characteristic of the mid- and late-19th century was not in contradiction with or even external to economic liberalism.² Rather, just as the liberal myth of bio-economic laws governing population and wages concealed the seldom acknowledged fact that state intervention was absolutely necessary, if only to regulate currency, to enforce tariff protection, and to ban trade unions, so too the liberal idea of the autonomous working-class family 'naturally' reproducing itself and its discipline masked an anxiety about the production of the social/moral preconditions of capitalist accumulation. The liberal capitalist state is supposed to respect privacy and not interfere in the economic, reproductive, or moral decisions of workers: but from 19th-century liberalism to today's social democracies, one can detect among ruling classes a profound uneasiness about the ability of the working class to reliably reproduce disciplined young workers, self-sacrificing poor mothers, and all the other identities making up what I call the moral capital of the poor — that which Himmelfarb, following her sources, unproblematically calls 'character.'³

²See essays by Donzelot, Procacci, and Foucault in G. Burcher, C. Gordon, and P. Miller, eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago 1991).

³I am deriving the concept of 'moral capital' by an analogy with 'cultural capital,' which, as Bourdieu shows in his massive study of class fragmentation in France, consists not so much of commodities but of a certain 'taste,' a way of doing things, a 'habitus.' See, Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste* (Cambridge, MA 1984).

Himmelfarb's main goal is to discredit leftist historiography of class and state formation by ranting at great lengths against the class-control explanation of philanthropy memorably put forward by Stedman Jones in his Marxist days.⁴ I say 'ranting' because, rather than engaging in serious critique, Himmelfarb simply makes counter-assertions: "Unless one discounts everything that contemporaries said, and the passion with which they said it, one must credit their abiding, overriding concern with the question of moral character." (8) Now, I have argued elsewhere that the discourse of moral reform needs to be analyzed seriously, not merely dismissed as a cover for class interests. But one can take moral discourse seriously and still admit that, while not due to or inevitably linked to class interests, moral discourse does as a matter of contingent fact legitimize certain class, gender, and racial interests. To dismiss all structural and class-interest explanations, as Himmelfarb does, is to reproduce and amplify reactionary views in the name of cultural specificity.

Which brings me to the last point about Himmelfarb, concerning gender, or rather its absence. Inevitably, some of the great English female reformers of the turn of the century — Helen Bosanquet, Octavia Hill, Beatrice Webb — do appear in her pages. Housing reformer Hill, who pioneered the detailed surveillance of the rooms, cupboards, and sleeping arrangements of the urban poor, gets an eight-page section concluding with an evocation of "the patient reformer who does what good she can." (218) But since she thought of herself as a reformer, not a theorist, she is marginalized from this history of 'great Ideas.' The marginalization of Beatrice Webb, by contrast, cannot be explained within the parameters of the book. She theorized at great lengths over many decades, producing (jointly with her husband Sidney) a body of work on both the theory and practice of state social regulation rarely matched either in volume or in influence. Her diaries and autobiographies also constitute the greatest single source for documenting 'reforming' London circles at the turn of the century, and indeed Himmelfarb uses them constantly. But there is no chapter devoted to Webb's 'great Ideas,' while her much less original and influential cousin Charles Booth gets no less than six. This is blatant sexism. A similar operation, verging on misogyny, is found in a curious section arguing that J.S. Mill did not really turn to the left in his later years, and that it is only the manipulation of his manuscripts, and possibly of his mind, by Helen Taylor Mill that gives us the false impression that he liked some forms of socialism. (265) After this it comes as no surprise that while she constantly denounces Marxist historiography, feminist work on social reform is passed over in silence. Himmelfarb does not merely believe that men make history: she still believes that Great Men make great history, at least when not derailed by their womenfolk.

As against Himmelfarb, I would argue that the philanthropists she chooses to study were actually engaged in stamping out the compassion of traditional charity. Even when religious (and most of the thinkers she selects were fairly secular at

⁴Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (Oxford 1971).

least in their intellectual work), they were not moved by compassion but rather by anxiety, specifically an anxiety that the working classes were not reproducing the Protestant work ethic naturally, and hence were in need of philanthropic intervention.

Mitchell Dean, an Australian historical sociologist, proves in his book a related point, namely that classical English liberalism was not a negation of state regulation but rather a particular system of economic, social, and moral regulation. One of liberalism's primary categories for both economic and moral regulation was 'pauperism' or 'destitution': hence, a history of pauperism is also a genealogy of liberalism, of the liberal practices of government which are often mislabelled as 'laissez faire' or 'deregulation.'

Although burdened by infelicitous prose and a rather slavish adherence not only to Foucault's method but even to his rhetorical forms, *The constitution of poverty* is well worth reading. First of all, Dean rescues the debates around pauperism and the Poor Law from their historiographical fate as minor issues which claim our attention only as slow steps toward The Welfare State (a teleological interpretation common to liberals and Marxists). Ignoring the traditional separation of history into economic, political, and social, he situates the discourses and practices governing both destitute people and the abstract category of 'pauperism' at the centre of the formation of liberal capitalist society. In this he follows Karl Polanyi, who argued forty years ago that pauperism and wealth were the twin categories whose analysis gave rise to 'the discovery of society.'⁵ Dean's analysis challenges liberalism's own self-image as a purely economic self-regulating system, but it also undercuts the Marxist view that moral regulation is an unimportant offshoot of economic class relations by expanding the analysis of the liberal state's role in constituting subjectivities pioneered by Corrigan and Sayer in *The Great Arch*.⁶

This leads to the second noteworthy feature of the book. Without making any professions of feminism, Dean shows that gender, family, and sexual relations, far from being either extra-economic or determined by economics, were and are key conditions of liberal economic and social policy. Malthus' catastrophic model, for instance, hinged on a naturalization of the 'male breadwinner' ideal, under which men were assumed to make all reproductive as well as economic decisions and women were assumed to derive their status from that of men. This naturalization of a particular moral code was then carried over into the 1834 New Poor Law: single women without children were totally ignored, while widows with children were stuffed into the category of 'non-able-bodied' regardless of their bodies, and mothers of illegitimate children, whatever their condition, were treated as 'sturdy beggars' and offered only 'the House.' (161, 169) The New Poor Law also made it next to impossible for mothers of illegitimate children to seek support from

⁵Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston 1957).

⁶P. Corrigan and D. Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Oxford 1985).

putative fathers — a provision showing that even in this archetypal liberal policy, moral and gender regulation sometimes took precedence over reducing state expenditure.

Let us now consider the substance of Dean's argument about the importance of pauperism for the economic/moral regulatory system known as liberalism. Dean agrees with Polanyi that the full commodification of labour, institutionalized in Britain by the abolition of Elizabethan guild regulations and of the Speenhamland system of using rates to subsidize wages, was indeed a fundamental historical break, creating a 'utopian' (Polanyi's term) market system whose internal contradictions have made constant social intervention necessary down to our own day. But he does not take up Polanyi's social-democratic call for restoring the primacy of social considerations over the economics of the market. Neither does he agree with Marx's view that the determining structure of liberalism is not the market but rather the capitalist mode of production, the logic of industrial capital. As an alternative to both social democracy and Marxism, Dean develops the Foucaultian view that the system characterized by the wage labour/pauperism dyad is a mode of moral regulation as much as a new type of distribution system or a new mode of production. (At the level of political practice, Dean's analysis would imply that moral/cultural struggles are just as important as class struggle in challenging capitalism; but he is not explicit about this.) Liberalism is, contrary to its own ideology, by no means indifferent to the non-economic features of working class (and for that matter bourgeois) life. It both requires and constructs a certain gender and household organization through specific moral and sexual practices, through all the substantive psychological and ethnical codes condensed by Victorians in the word 'character.' Classical liberalism is thus, for Dean, not correctly described as 'laissez-faire.' It is rather a new mode of regulating life. He argues, for instance, that the 18th-century notion of 'the moral economy' was not simply left behind as a feudal remnant, but rather had its content transformed as wage-labour and the responsibility of men for 'dependents' became new moral as well as economic imperatives.

The key liberal distinction between mere poverty (acknowledged by thinkers from Adam Smith to the IMF as inevitable for the majority) and pauperism was in fact a moral distinction. In Britain it was also legal, given the Poor Law, but philanthropists not dealing with legal paupers used an extra-legal classification of the needy as either moral and 'helpable' or vicious and degenerate. This dichotomy was taken for granted not only by philanthropists of Dickensian sensibilities but also by left-leaning thinkers from pre-Marxian socialists to early 20th-century social democrats. The French anti-capitalist writers on 'misère' of the 1840s argued that pauperism or misery was not economically measurable but rather "la pauvreté moralement sentie;"⁷ it was a cultural phenomenon characteristic of industrializing

⁷E. Buret, *De la misère des classes laborieuses en Angleterre et en France* (Paris 1840), vol. I, 113. Later Buret links *misère* or destitution to the development of industrial capitalism,

cities, quite distinct from traditional poverty. Much later the Fabians insisted on sharp distinctions between honest poor and dishonest paupers in their discussion of services for old people, children, and mothers, in the famous Minority Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws of 1909.⁸ These distinctions were fundamentally moral/cultural, but they were to serve as the parameters of modern bureaucratic social welfare practices. Even Marx resorted to bourgeois moral clichés when attempting to separate the honest proletariat from the ‘lumpen,’ the counter-revolutionary, petty-criminal “refuse of all classes.”⁹ There is no economic basis in Marx’s theory for separating the honest poor from the lumpen, since deskilling and the falling rate of profit suggest lumpenization as a common fate: the distinction between proletariat and lumpen, a socialist translation of the distinction between respectable and rough, is fundamentally moral/cultural. And, as Dean would point out, one of the main distinctions between the honest poor and the dishonest lumpen/paupers is that the former but not the latter are constituted in nuclear families with a male breadwinner.

If pauperism — from pre-Marxian socialism to Marx to the Fabians — is a moral category, it follows that so is its twin, wage labour. From his study of purely bourgeois sources, Dean concludes that “there are implicit moral characteristics of wage-labour, whether formulated in terms of the imperative to exchange in Smith, or as obedience to bioeconomic laws in classical political economy. Most important of these is the dual nature of the civil status of the wage-labourer as worker and head of household, the latter involving his patriarchal mastery in the private, domestic sphere.” (214) I would add that this model is developed and advocated not only in bourgeois sources but even in left-wing quarters.

saying that “la France est pauvre, l’Angleterre est misérable.” (I, 237) Buret’s insightful critique of political economy’s failure to acknowledge pauperism as the true offspring of capitalism was heavily used by Marx in his 1844 Manuscripts.

⁸[Minority] *Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws* (British House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 1909, vol. xxxvii). Old age pensions should not be unconditional but should be “granted only to the destitute aged who live decent lives” (941); maternal and child clinics are chiefly designed to increase the “sense of responsibility” even in “the most ignorant and apathetic of mothers.” (815) The Webbs also opposed unconditionally free school meals because “there was no suggestion of obtaining, in return for the food, any greater exertions by the parents...” (856) Those who persist in bad habits even when moralized by state officials are cast out of the system altogether.

⁹Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte* (Moscow 1954), 63. This is repeated in the *Manifesto*, where the “social scum” is said to be fated to become “a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue” (in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works* [New York 1976], vol. VI, 494). It is also echoed in *Class Struggles in France*: “...the lumpenproletariat, which in all big towns forms a mass sharply differentiated from the industrial proletariat ... a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals, living on the crumbs of society, people without a definite trade, vagabonds...” (Moscow 1972), 44.

Dean's awareness of the inseparability of moral and economic regulation and of the importance of patriarchal sexual and family relations for the capitalist labour market are sadly lacking in Fecteau's otherwise quite innovative study of state and philanthropic regulation of paupers in Lower Canada. Like Dean, Fecteau is more interested in modes of regulation than in modes of production:¹⁰ but for Fecteau regulation produces and is based on economic class, with gender and moral status, when considered at all, treated only as routes to class formation.

Un nouvel ordre des choses is methodologically innovative in surveying the institutions available for paupers in Lower Canada without assuming that the coercion exercised over criminals was opposed to or even separate from the 'benevolent' surveillance of institutions for the indigent. Even more remarkably, Fecteau's study shows that separating the 'history of the welfare state' from the history of charity, as historians in Anglophone Canada tend to do, is neither useful nor necessary. Important insights are made available by the juxtaposition of topics and issues usually treated in separate works by different historians. For instance, we discover that the 18th-century church-run hospitals received state funding as a matter of course (though colonial authorities expressed a wish to keep its grants for foundlings a secret for fear of encouraging immorality and irresponsibility). This practice continued without much question after the Conquest, which raises interesting questions about the real, that is, financial, relationship between the English colonial rulers and the Catholic church. It also prefigures the way in which post-confederation Ontario developed what one could call a 'mixed economy' of relief, in which governments gave grants or even wholly funded institutions and projects administered by philanthropists. (In Britain there was by contrast a very sharp division between the Poor Law and charity, even if many paupers used both simultaneously.)

Implicitly challenging the mushroom-growth model of welfare state formation, Fecteau shows that in Québec the impetus for modern methods of dealing with the indigent came from civil society more than from the state. Fecteau inventively scours the letters to the editor columns and the journals of the legislative assembly to gather evidence about the development, in the period 1815-1837, of a modernizing philanthropic discourse which was highly critical of ad hoc and non-intrusive old-fashioned charity methods. This research shows that Quebec was not behind

¹⁰While *Une nouvel ordre des choses* does not explicitly theorize the concept of 'modes of regulation,' elsewhere Fecteau undertakes a concrete study showing that the dichotomy of state vs. civil society can be deconstructed by studying the development of the capitalist mode of social regulation. J.-M. Fecteau, "État et associationnisme au XIXe siècle québécois" in A. Greer and I. Radforth, eds., *Colonial Leviathan: State formation in mid-nineteenth century Canada* (Toronto 1992). I am told the author did not want his article translated into English — a political choice with unfortunate consequences, since his theoretical perspective is not to my knowledge otherwise represented in Canadian historiography.

France and England in its intellectual commitment to social modernity: however, the colonial state, characterized by Fecteau as weakly grounded in local elites and local institutions, responded to this groundswell of opinion only in very small (and inexpensive) ways. Some government money was given to hospitals, but the much-discussed lunatic asylums and houses of correction would have to wait until after 1840 to be built with bricks rather than with discourse.

In many instances, the non-elected Council vetoed the legislative assembly's social initiatives. But Fecteau does not fall for the cliché of portraying a reactionary colonial government constantly holding back the innovations of enlightened reformers. Without theorizing its importance, Fecteau points out that both ends of the political spectrum actually agreed on the basic features of modern relief/philanthropy. For instance, while Peter McGill argued that state provision for foundlings was irrational because it weakened parental responsibility and amounted to a tax on the virtuous for the benefit of the fallen, patriot Louis-Joseph Papineau agreed that "*les fruits de la débauche*" ought not to be publicly supported. (153) Ad hoc unconditional relief to the needy was not desired by either political camp. Even while fighting each other, both sides agreed that loose morals (indicated by illegitimate children and prostitution) and drinking were the great social evils to be eliminated. One could go beyond Fecteau's evidence here and hypothesize that the discourse of masculine republicanism actually heightened the concern with moralizing the underclasses.

Having described the general features of the discursive attack on traditional charity, Fecteau goes on to show that the colonial state in the pre-Rebellion period was not flexible enough to respond to the new consensus. Unlike in Britain, where central power was firmly fixed at the local level by justices of the peace and mechanisms of proto-local government, Québec lacked a strong local base for colonial rule: in 1827 Governor Dalhousie belatedly complained to London that having Québec divided into three vast districts was inadequate from the point of view of administration. (212) Administrative control over paupers and criminals was necessarily haphazard. This created a crisis when the first waves of poor Irish immigration put pressure on the few existing institutions for relief of the sick, aged, and indigent. Irish immigration, together with the public-health crisis caused by the cholera of the early 1830s, forced the government to pay more attention to regulating the social as distinct from the political. And yet, the grants to charities were pitifully small, the policing mechanism remained unprofessional until after the Rebellion, and, in general, the administrative infrastructure remained weak throughout the period under study.

The extent to which Fecteau's work is innovative for Québec social history is something that others will have to judge; what I can say, however, is that as a contribution to the general literature on the welfare state and philanthropy this volume shows a remarkable theoretical sophistication, particularly in following the byways of social regulation without stopping at the traditional historiographical boundaries separating coercion from benevolence and the state as a whole from

charity. There is a weakness, however, in the way the content of social regulation of the poor is specified. In various places Fecteau describes institutions as “*moyens de contrôle*,” (173) a rather functionalist formulation which tends to suggest that the class-control function of an institution is its *raison d'être* and its origin. The social-control model is not rigorously followed, since elsewhere Fecteau talks in Foucaultian terms about therapeutic modes of social regulation and “resocialization.” And yet, one is left with the impression that social therapeutics is explainable simply through its class-control function. In this way, a model of negative class power, with the ruling class repressing popular customs, is implicitly promoted over the model used by Mitchell Dean, in which emphasis is placed on the positivity of social power, the creation and recreation of new forms of subjectivity. The latter approach would have helped not only to avoid the pitfalls of marxist functionalism but also to shed more light on the gender and moral codes dominating the modern working class. For example, the discussion of drinking and illegitimate children never considers that an important meaning of temperance was responsible masculinity; in turn, femininity was marked by sexual codes. In ways that differed depending on class, men were honest if they were breadwinners and women were honest if they were chaste. These moral codes are not intrinsic to the logic of capital, since capitalism works quite efficiently in different cultural systems. A separate analysis of the specificity of European social regulation is required, an analysis going beyond the dichotomous and economistic separation of 19th-century society into ‘the classes and the masses.’ (Fecteau often uses the term ‘masses,’ a term erasing key distinctions between women and men and between rough and respectable.)

Despite these weaknesses, however, which in any case are more external criticisms than internal flaws, Fecteau’s volume is a landmark work. Neither the history of state formation nor the history of philanthropy are well developed in Canada: this sophisticated contribution could (if read by Anglophone historian!) inspire young politicized and theoretically informed historians to undertake much-needed work on the social regulation of the poor in English Canada. In this period of retreat from universal social programs, privatization of services to the poor, and renewed faith in the ability of the mythical working-class family to be self-reliant in money and in ‘character,’ works like Dean’s and Fecteau’s are much more than historical.

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