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Tudor England

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A Synopsis and Analysis of *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England*

Paul Slack's *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* offers an exhaustive analysis of its subject, bringing together new research, revisions of old poverty and poverty law analysis and offering throughout original and sometimes challenging interpretations. The overall nexus of Slack's study is the suggestion that the country as a whole, during this particular period, was undergoing a gradual re-evaluation of the meaning of poverty, both in the sense of its pounds and pence definition: *who* were the poor; as well as its more moral meaning: *what* were the poor; and that the compartmentalisation inherent in this re-evaluation saw changes which were reflected in the various national poor laws and local strategies.

The first problem that Slack tackles is one of defining what poverty actually means. Rejecting a clear poverty line defined by subsistence level: the income required to keep the basic body (but not soul) together, Slack proposes that poverty can only be measured in reference to accepted social conventions and contemporary living standards. He goes on to demonstrate that the increasing number dependent upon various forms of charity does not definitively indicate a correlative worsening of the economy; indeed, he points out that the opposite is conceivably true: that an improving economy means increasing expectations and so raises the level of the poverty line. This is, in fact, the view of recent revisionist, but one which Slack finally rejects.

In the final introductory section, Slack places England's poverty reforms within the European context, showing various continental cities initiating enactments with similar characteristics: an effort to reduce or entirely eliminate begging and the transfer of responsibility away from the church to secular institutions. Although Protestant cities were in the *van garde*, it was not long before Catholic centres followed suit. Nevertheless, though religion did not play a major factor in differentiating between national strategies, Slack points out a number of essential differences between the development of English and Continental treatments of the poor. Firstly, the poor rate--the compulsory parochial tax begun in 1572, the funds of which were distributed in

cash payments. By 1660, this was the primary means of poor relief in most English parishes. Secondly, the settlement laws of England, where the unwelcome vagrant was forcibly conveyed to his home parish, was ill defined and little enforced on the continent. The final distinguishing feature was the prevalence in England of the endowed charity established by single rich benefactors and taking the form of almshouses, apprenticeship funds and annual doles. Slack points to three factors in explanation of these salient distinctions: the existence in England of a centralised government made more potent by an absence of autonomous provinces; the lack of major towns, abrogating the possibility of large *hôpital général* like institutions that were features of great French cities; the dissolution of religious establishments during the Reformation: with their charitable contributions lost, England was forced not simply to reorganise, as was the case in France, Italy and Spain, but to create new secular structures of poverty alleviation.

Having established the foundations, Slack begins an examination of the changing perceptions of poverty, offering the standard contemporary views of the poor: they were objects of charity, inciting pity and sometimes the admiration of the rich; they were a threat to security and morality who deserved no assistance and should, if possible, be eradicated; they were potential workers. All three perceptions existed simultaneously, though Slack suggests that there was a shifting of emphasis between 1500 and 1700 away from the first, through the second and to the third. This perception resulted in a marginalisation and victimisation of some poor, who were categorised as that undeserving menace: rogues and indolent thieves. With the number of sixteenth century beggars increasing, resentment and victimisation became more general: soon "tinkers, peddlers, minstrels and jugglers"¹ were included in Tudor vagrancy statutes.

¹Paul Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (Harlow, Longman Group UK Limited, 1988), p. 48.

The latter part of the sixteenth century finally saw the realisation that the poor possibly were neither impotent--and so deserving assistance, or impudent--and so deserving punishment, but that a third group existed, able and willing to work, perhaps householders, though unable to find employment.

The seemingly simplistic question: "Did poverty increase or decrease over time?"² is examined in all its complex permutations. Firstly, slack differentiates between "background" and "crisis" levels of poverty: the basic and largely unchanging numbers of poor and those temporary poverty peaks born of crop failure and natural catastrophes. Secondly, notions of "shallow" and "deep" poverty are introduced, showing now not the numbers but the intensity of their condition. Slack concludes that both background and depth of poverty increase during the sixteenth century, but that intensity decreased in the 1700s. A second area of economic study offers the somewhat expected disclosure of a vast imbalance in the distribution of wealth, with five percent of Londoners owning eighty percent of the wealth. The simple research and analysis providing this figure is unfortunately matched by serious difficulties estimating the distribution of wealth amongst the remaining ninety-five percent.

The most important factor in the economic context is, of course, the problems caused by an increasing population, which, in part, explains the ensuing large scale dislocation and the increase of vagabonds, previously assessed to be a result of the dissolution of monasteries and enclosure. Legislation of 1589 against building new cottages on common and waste land, and of lodgers; and discriminatory licences to beg are two responses to the social stress wrought of this rising population. Urban centres suffered also, with many of the dislocated moving into the towns and thus enlarging the spectre of the "dangerous" poor. Censuses of the poor, a common practice during the latter sixteenth and early seventeenth century, demonstrate, however, that the general

²Slack p. 38

background level of poverty was a somewhat manageable five percent.

Slack spends some considerable time examining the character of the “respectable poor” and the “dangerous poor,” and in doing so supports the correlation between the perception and the reality.

Tracing the evolution of the poor law, Slack first points of the difference between the aims of pre-Reformation charities and the secular replacements: charity encouraged begging, was not concerned with providing work and did not supply aid based upon standard measurements of local needs, each the antithesis of secular moves. Tudor poor policy began, during the reign of Henry VII, as a matter of security, aimed at the vagabond. This limited interest gradually expanded, particularly under the direction of Wolsey, who concerned himself with enclosure and provisions of corn during times of dearth. Development continued: attempts were made, and failed, to provide work for the unemployed. The statute of 1536 made all begging and almsgiving illegal. It too failed. One section though was a precursor to the poor rate: weekly collections for the poor were mandated in all parishes. Revised in 1552, those who refused to donate were “cessed and rated by the alderman”³ The Act of 1551 changed the punishment of vagabonds, replacing the stocks with whipping—an indication of the increasing heartlessness of sentiment; and also making licences to beg mandatory. The Vagrancy act of 1547 prescribed two years slavery for vagrants; but with a shortage of willing masters, it proved futile. The first Elizabethan poor law, 1563, intensified the 1552 revision: those refusing to donate to parish poor funds could now be imprisoned. The 1572 act, a response to the rebellion two years earlier, provided the death penalty for vagabonds twice convicted. This was repealed in 1593, modified to a third offence and reinstated in 1603. Statutes of 1598 saw a culmination of previous developments: punishment of vagabonds, poor rates, and the least successful, provision of materials to

³Slack p. 121

provide work for the unemployed.

After a re-examination of W. K. Jordan's research, discussing the changing levels and destinations of charity and the status and identity of benefactors, Slack offers support for the settlement laws, suggesting that they provided a "demarcation of entitlement"⁴ and thus made the whole poor law system workable. His conclusion paints a rosy picture of a green and pleasant and "civilised" land.⁵

There is certainly no doubt as to the quality of the scholarship involved in Slack's extensive treatise; and it is the revisionist and original interpretations which provide a resolute vigour and glitter to what is, at times, a somewhat vapid text. Perhaps the most important instance is Slack's careful evaluation of the rate of "background" poverty. Tronrud, in his 1985 articles, makes his own revisionist assessment, casting aside previous assumptions that a full two thirds of the Tudor population suffered from poverty, and offering a much more optimistic one third.⁶ This figure, as we have seen, is further and certainly remarkably reduced by Slack, who states that only five percent of background poverty existed. Tronrud, like Slack, rejects older calculations, based largely upon tax assessments. Despite the somewhat pedestrian nature of Tronrud's essay, he does nevertheless make a number of interesting points that are overlooked by Slack. One example of this is the sixteenth century conception of poverty:

... Tudor and early Stuart Englishmen viewed poverty not simply

⁴Slack, p. 194

⁵It is the scope, depth and complexity of *Poverty and Policy* that necessitated this somewhat lengthy summary.

⁶ Thorold J. Tronrud, "Dispelling the Gloom. The Extent of Poverty in Tudor and Early Stuart Towns: Some Kentish Evidence," *Canadian Journal of History* 20 (January, 1985) 1-21

as destitution but rather as a measure of social inequality. For them, poverty was worsening because of a growing man-made imbalance in the distribution of wealth . . .⁷

Tronrud here offers a simple yardstick by which contemporaries measured poverty itself, which effectively synthesises Slack's suggestion of the relativity of poverty with Tudor categorisation of the poor. The increasing polarisation of society, with the concomitant breakdown of feudal ties between the now absentee landlord and tenant suggests, according to Tronrud, a guilt factor which perhaps caused over sensitivity to poverty, fostering the belief that poverty was increasing. Contrary to Slack, he stresses that:

The belief of the sixteenth century that poverty was growing, therefore, should be taken to mean not that conditions were worsening but that wealth in the society was polarising.⁸

Certainly, Tronrud's calculation of "background" poverty is based upon fewer factors than that of Slack, and it seems likely that five percent is closer to a true picture than Tronrud's one third. As far as the level of poverty is concerned, Slack grounds his belief in a gradual increase principally upon demographics and inflation. Although these are certainly vital determinants, the increasing rate of social change in Tudor England--the move away from feudal/manorialism towards capitalism, to offer a simplistic synopsis--strongly suggests the validity of Tronrud's view also. Indeed, we can see instances of a similar sort in contemporary Canada, where perceptions of increasing violence show little correlation to actuality. Perhaps the best we can say is the somewhat philosophical deduction that though absolute deprivation might be marked by an absolute zero, poverty seems by definition entirely relative to local standards, expectations,

⁷Tronrud, p. 2-3

⁸Tronrud, p. 20

appreciations and discriminations. Since these factors themselves do not remain static, any effort to measure poverty rates over a lengthy period is problematic to say the least.

It is certainly ironic that though Slack digs and delves into almost every facet of Tudor and early Stuart poverty, he never seems to actually excavate the simple root cause: the bleeding of the masses by the elite and would be elite. The concrete manifestation of this was wages pegged too firmly to the subsistence line. Certainly, Slack speaks of unscrupulous landlords in burgeoning towns and hoarders and manipulators of corn stocks during times of dearth, but these are exceptions to the rule. If we turn for a moment to the anonymous ballads of this period, which offer an instance of vernacular culture, we see not only the expression of this sentiment, but perhaps an indication not only of a polarised society, but a polarised society bound not by charity but by resentment.

That poore men still inforced are

To pay more than they are able:

Me thought I heard them weeping say

Their substance was but small

Me thought I saw how wealthy men

Did grind the poore men's faces,

And greedy did prey on them,

Not pittyng their cases

They make them toyle and labour sore

For wages too-too small.⁹

It is because wages were “too-too small” that Slack’s “crisis” levels of poverty were an

⁹Cited by: Richard Harvey, “English Pre-Industrial Ballads on Poverty, 1500-1700,” *History* 46 (!984) p. 553

ever present danger. Quite simply, the margin between relative plenty and absolute impoverishment was too narrow: the masses lived a life balanced perpetually upon the precipice of disaster. It is for this reason that poverty laws were not only inevitable, but also must be seen more realistically as perpetuating not ameliorating the workers lot. This is a point which Slack can hardly make: he is restricted by one major motivational forces: a desire to describe England as a positive paradigm of innovative social reform, *avant garde* and *avant* the rest of Europe. Sentiments outlined in such popular ballads demonstrate not so much a period of innovation in which the modern Parliamentary system was being moulded, but a period of inequality from whence the schism of class was born; a period of reluctant munificence born of fear rather than social conscience; a period more analogous to the harsh heartlessness of Thatcherism than of the modern welfare state which saw its real birth about the second world war.

Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England, by virtue of its comprehensive and detailed constitution, provides a solid body of information; but its analysis demands careful consideration. Laced with diction distilled of objectivity, kept cool with charts and graphs, Slack nevertheless presents a greatly personal view, providing at times questionable conclusions, submitting to thesis driven selectivity of material, and even undermining his own arguments.

Although Slack seems to lean towards an account devoid of the pathos we find in such places as ballads and contemporary commentaries—both conspicuous by their exclusion—presenting an account of history which resembles more a social science than a humanities, this whole approach, as we shall see, is little more than a red herring that encourages us to accept his thesis as an objective theorem rather than a subjective appraisal.

Accordingly, though Slack begins his study with a lengthy examination of the meaning of poverty, deciding that it can only be measure against conventions and standards of living specific to a particular region, he nevertheless feels no misgivings in

periodically stating that the rest of Europe suffered much greater distress than did England. In this mien, Slack initially states that France tackled poverty through the establishment of large institutions: a central collection agency, the *bureau de charité*, was a feature of many towns and villages; and, in the larger towns, the *hôpital général*. Resembling the work house, its inmates numbered tens of hundreds rather than the “dozens” of the English model. We must certainly read this appraisal with the modern connotations with which it was written: the inimical anonymity of the large institution juxtaposed with the closeness and caring of personal attention. We might also wonder if Slack remembers his introduction when he states that:

The five London hospitals . . . founded or remodelled between 1544 and 1557, can only be compared with poor relief institutions in major cities on the continent. In conception and reality, flawed as it was, they were unique in England. . . . Other English towns copied some features of the London scheme, but the hospitals were larger and more ambitious than any of their provincial imitators. They represented the greatest experiment in social welfare in Tudor England.¹⁰

There is in this quotation no notion of merely a dozen or so inmates, as stated in his introductory description of English hospitals. We might also wonder in what respect they were unique to England, since they can “only be compared” to similar institutions on the continent. What we see in this statement is essentially the dichotomy of present day sentiment, which attempts to show its modernness by association with European advances, and yet simultaneously insists upon the uniqueness of English society.

Slack is most deliberate in his efforts to demonstrate that the poor laws, in their formation, were a product of a centralised government which, rather than operating in an intellectual vacuum, paid careful attention to local initiatives, and so suggests an

¹⁰Slack, p. 119.

interaction between local poverty and national policy. Political evolution, therefore, demonstrates an increasing centralisation, though the poor laws and Royal proclamations are seen neither as responses to the changing views of poverty and the poor, nor as shaping those views, but as a kind of organic summation of both. Slack's primary goal, of course, is to represent a country moving away from absolute monarchical rule towards a democracy which paid due attention to the wants of the wanting. The savage punishment of vagrants is therefore underplayed, and to a remarkable degree. The death penalty for second and third time vagabond convicts of the 1572 and 1603 laws respectively is presented as a mere characteristic of Tudor divisional philosophy. There can hardly be any doubt as to the ratiocination these penalties would have declared under the reign Bloody Mary.

As we have already mentioned, Slack offers a scholarly account which seems to incline towards objectivity. And yet, if this is indeed the case, we might wonder why the entire work is framed within two literary quotations: firstly that of Alexis de Tocqueville after his 1833 visit to England, appearing in the eighth paragraph; secondly, that of Dr. Johnson appearing not only in the final paragraph but almost as the final word. De Tocqueville describes his stupendous surprise upon discovering an England so rich and yet so beneficent to the poor, where all enjoy a standard of living higher than any other country in the world. Dr. Johnson decrees that "... a decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilisation";¹¹ meaning, of course, that England measures up to that test. Passing aside the point that both gentlemen are of the eighteenth century, their respective remarks, strategically placed, are an indication of Slack's emotive intent: his goal is not simply to inform but to convince by rhetorical means. As far as De Tocqueville is concerned, the end note reveals that this is a quotation of a

¹¹Slack, p. 208

quotation, and the statement: "With his characteristic agility in identifying a paradox,"¹² is clearly nothing more than well crafted rhetoric: clearly Slack has never actually read De Tocqueville. This is unfortunate, for De Tocqueville is known not so much for his ability to identify a paradox, as for his love a well ordered and potent government and his liberal use of superlatives. *Democracy in America*, for example, displays a keen admiration for the north east, with its regulated society, and an admonishment for both the south, whose plantation system is very much reminiscent of a backward feudal society, and also the wildness of the lawless west.

Although *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* is a remarkable achievement in research, synthesis and analysis, which provides a banquet of thought provoking ideas, his analysis is somewhat tainted with national pride and the desire to demonstrate that that national pride is not misplaced.

¹²Slack, p. 5