

Poverty - A History

Bronislaw Geremek

translated from the Polish by Agnieszka Kolakowska
Blackwell 1994

A book review by [Danny Yee](#) © 2000 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

Despite the general title, *Poverty* only really covers Western Europe, with a nod to central Europe and Poland, and, though it touches on the contemporary world and looks back at earlier antecedents, its focus is very much on the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is there and then that Geremek places the origins of distinctively modern ideas about and approaches to poverty. (Those who aren't interested in that period may find *Poverty* heavy going: it is a solid work of historical scholarship.)

Geremek begins with medieval poverty, looking first at Christian doctrine and ideology, at the difference between exaltation of the spiritual, voluntary poverty of ascetics and the degradation of the genuinely poor. He describes the practice of begging and the operation of charitable institutions: beggars "were an integral part of the social 'division of labour' and participated in organized forms of corporate professional life". And he explores the sociology of medieval poverty, its demographics, geography, and economics.

Attitudes to poverty changed with the broader "disintegration" of medieval society. Starting with the Black Death, the period saw changes in the balance between prices and wages, food crises, and demographic and economic expansion: the sixteenth century was "a turning-point in long-term economic trends". Increasing poverty in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was largely the result of "transformations in the agrarian system and the social structure of the countryside", with the progressive changes driven by movement towards a cash economy superimposed on the ordinary cycle of famine. And there are a growing number of studies of the role of poverty in the origins of [capitalism](#), of variations between "advanced" and "backward" regions, and of its dimensions in particular cities.

Geremek next presents case studies of reforms of charity from Paris, Venice, and Ypres in the 1520s and from Grenoble, Rouen, Lyons, Valladolid, and Norwich later in the century. Though municipalities went their own way, there were common themes.

Local reforms, regardless of the extent of their proven success or permanence, always involved the same measures: taking a census of paupers, expelling as many of them as possible from the city, distinguishing those qualifying for support by various identifying signs, centralizing the administration of hospitals and social aid and providing, mostly through taxes, the resources for their continued activity.

Attempts at a more centralised approach included the imperial edict of 1531 and in England the edicts of Henry VIII and the Poor Law of 1597 to 1601. Geremek also looks at some of the sixteenth century writers who debated the theology and politics of charity: Luther, Erasmus, Vivés, Frycz, de Soto, and Giginta.

Geremek also connects the response to beggars with the origins of modern prisons: "Before prison became widespread as a method of punishing and re-educating offenders, it was used in modern Europe as an instrument in implementing social policy with regard to beggars". The sixteenth century saw the origins of workhouses in England and moves in Rome to segregate and confine the poor, while the seventeenth brought the General Hospital and "the great imprisonment" in France. A brief chapter at the end of *Poverty* looks at the contemporary world (by which Geremek means the last two hundred years), touching on theorists from Marx to Harrington, the improvement of welfare systems — "the just distribution of goods no longer belonged to the domain of charity; it was henceforth a socio-political issue" — and the poverty of nations.

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