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*Poor relief and English economic development before the industrial revolution*¹

By PETER M. SOLAR

The English economy was distinctive, even before its transformation by the technological advances of the late eighteenth century. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries England diverged in economic structure from most continental countries. English agriculture attained a high level of labour productivity, thus permitting relatively rapid population growth, a shift in economic activity towards manufacturing and services, and rising incomes relative to the continent.² At the same time the English state, thanks to its ability to mobilize resources through taxation and borrowing, was able to ensure domestic tranquillity and to extend its power around the world.³ The nexus between these economic and political developments has been the subject of recent work on the finances and policies of central government.⁴ Poor relief, the quintessential function of local government in England, is ripe for inclusion in this new political economy of English development in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵

A fresh look at the economic impact of the old poor law should help to reconcile two apparently divergent strands in the history of poor relief. One line of research, launched by Blaug in the early 1960s, drew its inspiration from nineteenth-century critics of the poor law and focused primarily on developments during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁶ It tested several alleged adverse effects of poor relief and generally found little evidence for them. Summarizing this literature, Digby concluded: 'Recent investigations . . . by historians, economists, and demographers . . . emphas-

¹ This short article hardly justifies all the help and encouragement I have received since I started thinking about the comparative history of poor relief many years ago. My greatest debts are to the friends and colleagues who commented in writing or in extended conversation on earlier drafts: Jan Blomme, George Boyer, Paul David, Cesar Deben, Casper de Vries, Anne Digby, Karl Ditt, James Foreman-Peck, Scott Gassler, Joanna Innes, Rina Lis, Don McCloskey, Joel Mokyr, Cormac Ó Gráda, Gunnar Persson, Jean-Philippe Platteau, Gilles Postel-Vinay, Peter Scholliers, Chris Smout, Keith Snell, Hugo Soly, Albert Tanner, Richard Tilly, Michael Turner, Herman Van der Wee, Marco van Leeuwen, Michelangelo van Meerten, Jan-Luiten van Zanden, David Weir, Ron Weir, and Stuart Woolf. I am especially grateful to Bernard Smith for his help in producing the final version. I have also benefited from the comments of participants at seminars in Oxford, Paris, and Utrecht.

² Crafts, *British economic growth*, pp. 48–69; Wrigley, 'Urban growth'; *idem*, *Continuity*; Allen, *Enclosure*; de Vries, 'Decline and rise', p. 182. For a dissenting view: Clark, 'Agriculture'.

³ Brewer, *Sineews of power*.

⁴ O'Brien, Griffiths, and Hunt, 'Political components'; O'Brien, 'Political economy'; *idem*, *Power with profit*; North and Weingast, 'Constitutions and commitment'.

⁵ Stone, 'England's financial revolution', p. 52.

⁶ Blaug, 'Myth of the old poor law'; *idem*, 'Poor law report'. This literature is surveyed in Digby, *Poor law*; Huzel, 'Labourer and the poor law'; Boyer, *Economic history*.

ize that relief under the old poor law was essentially a response to population growth, under-employment, and low wages, rather than their cause.⁷

In contrast to this largely passive view of relief, recent work on the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries stresses the centrality of poor relief and its administration in English local communities. Snell argues that: 'The old poor law provides the key to a social understanding of the eighteenth century It permeated social relationships with its wide-ranging influence over aspects of parish life such as employment and the regulation of wages, price fixing, the grain market, apprenticeship, marriage, settlement, allocation of relief, or the treatment of the elderly.'⁸ Wrightson observes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: 'In every parish the paradoxical nature of the social development of the period was enshrined in the institutions of the Poor Law—providing relief, enforcing discipline, an expression of communal responsibility yet a potent reminder of social distance.'⁹

Poor relief certainly played a part in maintaining a stable political and social context for economic development. The English system was, according to Beier, 'a powerful weapon for checking poverty on a national scale, funded by statutory taxes and administered by state officials. In the Europe of 1650 that was no mean achievement and undoubtedly contributed to England's long-term social stability compared with other states.'¹⁰ But did this omnipresent social institution have other more specific influences on economic development? Are there avenues of causation that have been left unexplored?¹¹

This article argues that poor relief played an integral, and to a degree autonomous, part in England's economic development. In order to see how, it is necessary to stand back from temporal and regional variations in English experience and to focus on the distinctive features of English poor relief. Blaug's pioneering work looked at the old poor law in the context of problems faced by developing countries of the mid twentieth century, but this comparative perspective largely disappeared from subsequent work.¹² Here the English system will be compared with relief elsewhere in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From this angle English poor relief stands out as uniform and comprehensive in its spatial coverage; as reliant on local property taxation for its funding; and as relatively generous and certain in its benefits.

In addition to surveying, albeit selectively, the work on early modern

⁷ Digby, *Poor law*, p. 13. For a similar assessment: Rose, 'Social change', pp. 272-4.

⁸ Snell, *Annals*, pp. 104-5.

⁹ Wrightson, 'Social order', p. 201. See also Wrightson and Levine, *Poverty and piety*, p. 183; Levine and Wrightson, *Making of an industrial society*, pp. 353-5.

¹⁰ Beier, *Problem of the poor*, p. 29.

¹¹ Some scholars have suggested a more positive economic role for poor relief without developing the arguments at length: Mokyr, 'Industrial revolution', pp. 13-5; *idem*, 'Editor's introduction', pp. 51-4; Thirsk, 'Agricultural policy', pp. 382-6; Smith, 'Transfer incomes', pp. 203-6; Wrigley, *Continuity*, pp. 118-22; Slack, *English poor law*, pp. 53-5. Some of these arguments were anticipated by defenders of the English poor law and proponents of an Irish poor law in the early nineteenth century: Black, *Economic thought*, pp. 86-133.

¹² Work by English (and some American) scholars tends to be Anglocentric, in sharp contrast to that of continental scholars such as Gutton, *La société et les pauvres*; Lis and Soly, *Poverty and capitalism*; van Leeuwen, 'Surviving'; *idem*, 'Logic of charity'.

poor relief, this article also speculates on the effects of relief on economic development. Some simple economic reasoning is used to draw out the implications of the essential features of the English system. One line of argument looks at poor relief as a system of insurance and focuses on the behaviour of beneficiaries. The other examines the way in which relief was financed and how this affected the behaviour of the property owners who paid for the system. In both cases the article focuses on rural developments because the differences between English and continental relief were greatest outside the towns. While not offering a complete and quantitative assessment of the economic effects of the English poor law, the article puts forward a reinterpretation of its impact by setting English and continental developments in comparative perspective. It seeks both to draw out the implications of existing work on the early modern period and to raise new questions for investigation.

As both survey and speculation, this article is for the most part timeless. It analyses a system of poor relief that was created during the sixteenth century and well established by the mid seventeenth century in a form that would change in only minor ways before the early nineteenth.¹³ Yet the system did have a beginning and an end, both of which must figure in an interpretation of its economic role. These issues are taken up at the end of the article.

I

English poor relief differed from most continental systems, first of all, in its uniformity and comprehensiveness.¹⁴ Under the English poor laws of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, all men and women were eligible for relief and all parishes were charged with the responsibility for organizing and financing it. While similar legislation was enacted in other European countries during the same period, what distinguished English poor relief was the extent to which the system was put into practice.¹⁵ Many parishes had already organized relief in the sixteenth century. Indeed, Tudor legislation can be seen as codifying practices that arose from widespread local experimentation. Yet in 1600 parish relief was far from universal. The spread of the system to almost all English parishes by the late seventeenth century owed much to the activity of the Privy Council before 1640 and to the influence and authority of county and municipal officers during the seventeenth century.¹⁶ Throughout the history of English poor relief the law officers of the crown played a vital role in ensuring that

¹³ Slack, *English poor law*, ch. 3; Lis and Soly, *Poverty and capitalism*, p. 96.

¹⁴ My conclusions about continental poor relief have been based primarily on the comparative works cited above and on Hufton, *Poor*; Jones, *Charity and bienfaisance*; Dorwart, *Prussian welfare state*; Sachsse and Tennstedt, *Geschichte*; Braun, *Industrialisation*; Head-König, 'La politique pratiquée'; *idem*, 'Marginalisation'; Bonenfant, *Le problème du paupérisme*.

¹⁵ Leonard, *Early history*, pp. 290-1; Dickson, 'In search'; Mitchison, 'North and south'; Sagarra, *Social history*, p. 165.

¹⁶ Leonard, *Early history*. The same administrative dynamic, and the same contrast with continental developments, can be seen in the diffusion of bridewells, the prisons of the poor law system: Innes, 'Prisons'.

parishes did their duty.¹⁷ The English magistrates, as arbiters of disputes between parishes and as authorities responsible for public order, prevented many forms of burden-shifting and free-riding by local authorities.¹⁸ By ensuring minimum standards of relief, they brought considerable uniformity to its administration.

Elsewhere in Europe national laws were not effectively enforced, so that poor relief depended much more on local initiative and hence displayed greater diversity in its organization and benefits.¹⁹ Patterns of development in continental relief were not entirely absent. Many problems were similar and led eventually to similar solutions. Imitation was also important, with the models for poor relief changing over time: Nuremberg in the early sixteenth century, Amsterdam in the early seventeenth, Hamburg in the late eighteenth.²⁰ The more serious problem was the lack of comprehensiveness in continental poor relief. In many places its organization was at best rudimentary.

Continental relief most resembled that in England in the towns, though there were differences. Almost all towns of any size had relief institutions; some, such as Amsterdam, even had parallel systems to serve different constituencies. While churches dispensed much relief, centralized municipal institutions figured prominently in continental towns, which meant that indoor relief was more common than in England.²¹ The importance of centralized institutions meant that more money went into bricks and mortar and to salaried personnel than in the more decentralized English system, where outdoor relief predominated and administrators were mostly unpaid.²²

English poor relief differed most from continental relief in the countryside. In England poor relief was better organized in rural areas than in the towns. The share of the population relieved in the countryside was often higher, although this may have been, in part, because the movement of young adults left rural parishes with relatively more children and old people.²³ On the continent rural relief was less systematically organized and was poorly funded.²⁴ In late eighteenth-century France there were large variations

¹⁷ Clark, 'Migration in England', pp. 240-1; Halévy, *England in 1815*, p. 379.

¹⁸ De Swaan's interpretation of the development of the welfare state begins from an analysis of such problems: *In the care*, pp. 22-41.

¹⁹ Dorwart, *Prussian welfare state*, pp. 101-5. Exceptions may be Denmark and Switzerland, though in both cases there still existed areas where relief was not well organized in the late eighteenth century: Levine, *Poverty*, pp. 74-5; Head-König, 'La politique pratiquée', pp. 73-4.

²⁰ Lis and Soly, *Poverty and capitalism*, pp. 82-96, 119-25, 213-4; Gutton, *La société et les pauvres*, pp. 102-5; Lindemann, *Patriots and paupers*; Sachsse and Tennstedt, *Geschichte*, pp. 113, 125-8.

²¹ Lis and Soly, *Poverty and capitalism*, pp. 116-30; Gutton, *La société et les pauvres*, pp. 122-57; Slack, 'Comment', pp. 284-5. But outdoor relief could also be important: van Leeuwen, 'Surviving', p. 320.

²² Chaney, '“Philanthropy”'.

²³ Williamson, *Coping with city growth*, pp. 34-6.

²⁴ Watts, *Social history*, p. 238; Leonard, *Early history*, pp. 290-2; Dorwart, *Prussian welfare state*, pp. 100-5; Woolf, *Poor in western Europe*, pp. 19-20; Jones, *Charity and bienfaisance*, pp. 45-6; Fairchild, *Poverty and charity*, p. 108; Bonenfant, *Le problème du paupérisme*, pp. 135-7. The exceptions were Denmark (from 1708), the Duchy of Schleswig (1736), the northern Netherlands and parts of the southern Netherlands: Riis, 'Poverty and urban development', p. 19; Lis and Soly, *Poverty and capitalism*, p. 174. As a result, the literature on continental relief deals overwhelmingly with urban relief, which could suggest either a lack of evidence or a lack of relief: van Leeuwen, 'Surviving', pp. 334, 337.

across parishes in the numbers relieved and in the amounts of relief given.²⁵ In France and other countries the share of the population receiving relief also tended to be lower in the countryside than in the towns.²⁶ The inflow of paupers from the countryside during crises was another indication that relief was relatively better organized in continental towns.²⁷

The second distinctive feature of English poor relief was its source of finance: a local tax on income from property. In principle this tax applied to all forms of property, but, in practice, it fell primarily on land and buildings.²⁸ Parishes levied a variable poor rate on the assessed rental value of local property.²⁹ Reliance on this one form of taxation contributed to the system's considerable uniformity in organization and benefits.

Tax finance meant that no property owner could easily avoid paying for the parish's poor. Leading property owners were also liable for selection as unpaid overseers of the poor, the administrators of the system. Since most English parishes were small and both the ownership and occupation of the land were quite concentrated, the relationship between relief expenditures and the corresponding tax burden was easily perceived.

Continental poor relief, by contrast, was financed from a variety of sources: voluntary donations, income from capital, subsidies from local and national governments, and taxes. The relative importance of these sources varied from place to place. The small Dutch city of Den Bosch paid for almost all relief given during the eighteenth century from the legacies of earlier centuries.³⁰ But few places could live off the past. Amsterdam's major relief institutions, by contrast, drew more or less equally on donations, income from capital, and municipal subsidies during the early nineteenth century.³¹ In France and Germany relief institutions depended primarily on donations.³²

In cases where continental relief was financed by taxation, either directly or via government subsidies, excise taxes predominated. The incidence of such taxes fell in large part on the poorer classes in the community. By contrast, the burden of the English poor rate, although paid by the occupiers of property, in the long run fell primarily on the property owners through lower rents. The English system, at least relative to tax-financed relief on the continent, thus involved more redistribution of income.³³

The overall redistributive effect of continental relief depended on the incidence of charitable giving. A local elite might have had many motives—religious, political, social and economic—for becoming involved in financing and administering poor relief. But it was always difficult to overcome the

²⁵ Hufton, *Poor*, pp. 173-6, 369-81.

²⁶ J.-L. van Zanden and L. Soltow have assembled such information for several countries in their work on trends in income distribution. I thank J.-L. van Zanden for information on this point.

²⁷ Hufton, *Poor*, p. 97.

²⁸ In parts, for example, parishes tried to tax the stocks of merchants: Oxley, *Poor relief*, p. 48; Wilson, 'Poverty and philanthropy', pp. 278-9.

²⁹ Snell, 'Settlement', pp. 161-2.

³⁰ Prak, 'Goede bureu'.

³¹ van Leeuwen, *Bijstand*, pp. 151-7; Hufton, *Poor*, pp. 131-76.

³² Hufton, *Poor*, pp. 131-76; Sachsse and Tennstedt, *Geschichte*, pp. 108-9.

³³ Allen, *Enclosure*, pp. 300-2.

free-rider problem. Social pressures might work where the local elite was homogeneous and committed to the organization of relief.³⁴ Towns in the Netherlands were able to raise substantial funds year in, year out through collections. Towns in Ireland, on the other hand, could mobilize funds in time of crisis, but then giving usually dried up.³⁵ In rural areas, in Ireland and elsewhere, the presence of key landowners could have a decisive influence on local charity.³⁶

The third distinctive feature of English poor relief was its relative certainty and generosity. The old poor law did not constitute a modern welfare state (though Blaug once called it 'a welfare state in miniature').³⁷ But English men and women could count on relief authorities to help them in a variety of well-defined situations: old age, widowhood, illness or disability, seasonal or cyclical unemployment. These entitlements could be important supplements to income.

English men and women certainly believed that they had a right to relief.³⁸ This was precisely the complaint of early nineteenth-century reformers.³⁹ The law obliged the parish to relieve its poor and gave it the means through property taxation. Magistrates kept parish authorities from shirking their responsibilities.⁴⁰ Central government had sufficient faith in the system to leave to parishes the support of soldiers, sailors, and their dependants.⁴¹ Where local authorities did fail to respond to distress or responded in a niggardly way, they faced the threat of popular unrest, which could take the form of a ritualized defence of entitlements. The reactions of the authorities in such episodes and the lack of systematic opposition to the system of poor relief until the early nineteenth century indicate its widespread acceptance by the English elite.⁴²

Problems did arise around the boundaries of relief entitlements. The most contentious area concerned the rights of able-bodied labourers. In agriculture the incomes of such labourers became increasingly precarious during the eighteenth century, and Boyer describes how and why they were accorded relief from the 1760s.⁴³ Outside agriculture able-bodied labourers were most vulnerable in periods of high food prices, particularly if these coincided with depressions in trade. While the behaviour of relief authorities in such crises needs more study, they do seem, in general, to have responded by supplementing incomes in one way or another.⁴⁴ Sometimes the local response took place outside the traditional bounds of the relief system, for

³⁴ van Leeuwen, 'Logic of charity', pp. 592-600.

³⁵ Dickson, 'In search', pp. 156-7.

³⁶ Hufton, *Poor*, pp. 196-7. On a similar problem in north-west England see Walter, 'Subsistence strategies', p. 74.

³⁷ Blaug, 'Poor law report', p. 229.

³⁸ Snell, *Annals*, pp. 72-3; Beier, *Problem of the poor*, p. 36; Snell, 'Pauper settlement', pp. 375-415; Slack, *English poor law*, pp. 36-7; Laslett, *World . . . further explored*, pp. 149-51; Poynter, *Society*, p. 4.

³⁹ Malthus, *Essay*, p. 83; Knott, *Popular opposition*, pp. 28-33.

⁴⁰ Clark, 'Migration in England', pp. 240-1.

⁴¹ Innes, 'Domestic face'.

⁴² Thompson, 'Moral economy'; Rule, *Labouring classes*, pp. 348-53; Knott, *Popular opposition*, pp. 28-33; Shelton, *English hunger*, pp. 29-30.

⁴³ Boyer, *Economic history*, pp. 85-149.

⁴⁴ Walter, 'Subsistence strategies', pp. 58, 69-76.

example, by special subscriptions to support the distribution of food at subsidized prices, perhaps to avoid a ratchet effect on poor rates.⁴⁵

Entitlements were also limited to a person's parish of settlement, but the constraints of the settlement laws should not be overstated. Parishes, particularly in industrial areas, granted relief to persons without legal entitlements (casual relief). They were also able to secure repayment or subsidies from the rural parishes where paupers were officially settled (non-resident relief).⁴⁶

Continental relief was, in any case, circumscribed by stricter and less flexible settlement laws.⁴⁷ More importantly, entitlements to relief on the continent were less easily enforced and less credibly assured. The granting of relief was, in general, entirely at the discretion of local authorities. Charitable institutions might adopt criteria for eligibility, but these were subject to reinterpretation and alteration. Rejected applicants had no legal recourse and the precarious finances of many charitable institutions made entitlements less than certain.⁴⁸

English poor relief was significantly more generous than continental relief. Annual spending on poor relief amounted to about 1 per cent of national income in the late seventeenth century and rose to about 2 per cent by the late eighteenth century.⁴⁹ In the 1780s national expenditure per caput in England was more than seven times higher than in France.⁵⁰ In the 1820s it was two and a half times that in the Netherlands and almost five times that in Belgium.⁵¹ Income replacement rates for the elderly and for single mothers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were much higher than on the continent.⁵²

But spending was only part of the story. Preindustrial England may have had less need for poor relief than did the continent, in part because English relief—a national system that provided credible entitlements backed by local taxation of property—functioned in ways that promoted economic development.

II

Poor relief can be viewed as a form of insurance. Residents of small local communities had a good idea of the sort of assistance they might receive in

⁴⁵ Christie, *Wars and revolutions*, pp. 177-8; Walter, 'Subsistence strategies', p. 76; Clay, *Economic expansion*, I, p. 229.

⁴⁶ Taylor, 'Different kind'.

⁴⁷ Van Damme, 'Onderstandswonst', pp. 483-95; Head-König, 'Marginalisation', pp. 82-7; Redford, *Labour migration*, pp. 87-8.

⁴⁸ This is not to deny that some European localities did organize effective poor relief or that residents of these localities did feel secure in their entitlements to relief. Towns which depended on immigration of labour or which needed a reserve of casual labour had good economic reasons for organizing relief effectively. Amsterdam relief authorities provided regular and reliable income supplements to the city's dock workers: van Leeuwen, 'Surviving', pp. 327-30.

⁴⁹ Slack, *English poor law*, p. 30; Lindert, 'Towards a comparative history', pp. 228-31.

⁵⁰ Slack, *English poor law*, p. 30; Hufton, *Poor*, pp. 175, 193.

⁵¹ Slack, *English poor law*, p. 30; Mokyr, *Industrialization*, p. 196.

⁵² Thomson, 'Decline of social welfare'; *idem*, 'Welfare and the historians'; Snell and Millar, 'Lone-parent families'; van Leeuwen, 'Surviving', pp. 334-7.

a number of reasonably well-defined situations. Such expectations could influence behaviour, even of those who never, in fact, had to resort to relief. Seeing poor relief as insurance makes the vital point that its economic impact was not only on the 5 to 15 per cent of the population who received relief at any time, but on the much larger group, of anywhere from one-third to four-fifths of the population, who lived near poverty and might need relief at some time in the future.⁵³

English poor relief did not suffer much from the classic problems associated with the provision of insurance: moral hazard and adverse selection. There is moral hazard when as the result of being insured against a specified event, an individual changes his or her behaviour in such a way as to make the event more likely. In the context of poor relief, this might involve feigning either illness or the inability to find work. But moral hazard was unlikely to have been a severe problem in small communities where potential recipients were well known to relief authorities. Adverse selection occurs when providers of insurance cannot distinguish high from low risk individuals. Under the old poor law this was not a problem because all individuals were covered.⁵⁴

While in preindustrial Europe individuals protected themselves from risks regarding income, employment, and health through saving and through family and employment relationships, these alternatives to poor relief had their shortcomings.⁵⁵ Family members might lack the willingness or resources to help, especially if they, too, faced high prices or unemployment. Most individuals had little in the way of savings and there was only a limited choice of assets in which to set aside resources. Friendly societies were persistently underfunded and had low survival rates.⁵⁶ Guilds were not ideal for diversifying risk and were on the decline through much of the period. Finally, the small size and high turnover of enterprises made it difficult to conclude credible long-term employment contracts.

What important individual decisions may have been influenced by the existence of a well-developed system of poor relief? One, which has been treated in detail elsewhere, was to marry and have children. The collective provision for old age (sickness and disability might also be included) underpinned the west European pattern of late marriage and relatively low fertility.⁵⁷ Parents did not need as many children in order to ensure that there would be someone to care for them. But against this argument for lower fertility must be set, in the case of England, the pro-natal effect of help given to families with many children.⁵⁸

Another crucial decision influenced by the existence of relief was to work for wages. Reliance on income from wages involved two related risks. First, the availability of employment was irregular, as the demand for labour

⁵³ Cipolla, 'Economic fluctuations', p. 65; Hufton, *Poor*, pp. 24, 45; Beier, *Problem of the poor*, p. 5.

⁵⁴ In this respect the English case does not fit de Swaan's general theory of charity and relief: *In the care*, pp. 21-41.

⁵⁵ On the limited insurance available in pre-industrial society, see Braun, *Industrialisation*, pp. 168-72.

⁵⁶ Gosden, *Self-help*, pp. 33-7.

⁵⁷ Lesthaeghe, 'On the social control'; Smith, 'Fertility, economy'; Hajnal, 'Two kinds'.

⁵⁸ Boyer, 'Malthus was right'.

varied seasonally or cyclically.⁵⁹ Secondly, real wages fluctuated, in large part because of variations in the price of food. These risks were related in that high prices tended to be associated with low employment.⁶⁰

The main alternative to working for wages was to obtain access to land, either as owner or tenant.⁶¹ This could be a complete substitute, for full-time farmers, or a partial one, for smallholders who also worked as agricultural labourers or as domestic manufacturers. While those with land avoided the uncertainties of labour and food markets, growing one's own food still involved the risk of harvest failure.⁶² But when harvests did fail, wage employment also became scarce and food prices rose.⁶³

The English poor law, by providing protection from destitution, made obtaining access to land less urgent. English men and women did want land, but, other things being equal, the existence of poor relief meant that they were not willing to pay so much simply to ensure their own food supply.⁶⁴ In purely economic terms the sale prices and the rents of small plots ought not to have included a large subsistence premium. Interpreted more broadly, individuals or groups should have been less inclined to resort to violence when access to land was threatened.⁶⁵ Poor relief helped to counter the land hunger so characteristic of preindustrial populations and to tilt the balance in the direction of wage labour.⁶⁶

One implication of this argument is that the existence of poor relief should have facilitated enclosure. Many cottagers and smallholders lost access to land because they could not afford to enclose a small parcel or because their formal or informal common rights were extinguished.⁶⁷ While there was some resistance to enclosure, the English were, by continental or Irish standards, quite easily separated from the land in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁶⁸

⁵⁹ Malcolmson, *Life and labour*, pp. 77-8; Snell, *Annals*, p. 13; Gutton, *La société et les pauvres*, pp. 56-9; Hufton, *Poor*, chs. 3, 4.

⁶⁰ Cole, 'Factors', pp. 51-6; Cipolla, 'Economic fluctuations', pp. 69-70. But real earnings for those in employment may have fluctuated less than did their real wages (Hunt and Botham, 'Wages', pp. 396-7). On the acute vulnerability of wage labourers in developing countries, see Drèze and Sen, *Hunger*, pp. 5-6.

⁶¹ Another alternative, not available in England or western Europe, was to sell oneself into slavery. Hellie, *Slavery*, pp. 377-8, 692-708, has shown that voluntary enslavement was common in Muscovite Russia and argued that it was necessary 'because there were inadequate alternative relief or welfare institutions'. As slavery gave way to serfdom, welfare functions were taken up by the extended household and by the lords.

⁶² The nature of the risks in cultivation and their role in explaining open field agriculture are explored in McCloskey, 'Prudent peasant'. My argument, like McCloskey's, supposes that peasants were highly averse to taking risks. Another factor in the desire for land may have been the ability to employ more fully the labour of women and children. Other ways in which reliance on money wages and purchased food was attenuated in early modern England are catalogued by Walter, 'Social economy', pp. 96-106.

⁶³ Smallholders with some output surplus to family needs could also stabilize their consumption by trading. The risk reducing possibilities of trade are explored in Hoffman and Mokyr, 'Peasants'.

⁶⁴ Snell, *Annals*, p. 12. See also the central role of control over common land in the revolution and Restoration of the seventeenth century: Hill, *World turned upside down*, pp. 349, 360.

⁶⁵ Note that even agricultural labourers without land took little part in food riots until the early nineteenth century: Walter, 'Social economy', p. 128.

⁶⁶ On wage labour, see Millward, 'Emergence'; Clarkson, 'Introduction'.

⁶⁷ On the value of common rights, see Malcolmson, *Life and labour*, pp. 24-35; Humphries, 'Enclosures'; King, 'Customary rights'; Rogers, 'Custom and common right'.

⁶⁸ Opposition to enclosure may have been greater than has usually been recognized, but in England rural unrest was almost certainly less widespread, less frequent, and less violent than in Ireland or

Even in areas that were already enclosed the existence of poor relief kept in check the demand for smallholdings as population grew. The price that labourers and smallholders were willing to pay, in either economic or political terms, was not high enough to induce landowners to permit the subdivision of farms.⁶⁹ Instead, widespread and gradual consolidation went on in both open field and already enclosed parishes.⁷⁰ The result of both enclosure and piecemeal consolidation was that the average size of farms increased and the number of holdings fell in England during the eighteenth century.⁷¹

In Ireland and on the continent, by contrast, the pressure of population growth led to the fragmentation of holdings and an increase in the number of minute plots. The smallholder's 'self-exploitation'—the payment of exorbitant rent and the application of 'uneconomic' amounts of labour—can be interpreted as the premium paid for the security provided by land.⁷² So, too, can survival strategies such as the resort to regular seasonal migration in order to retain a holding that could not otherwise support a family.⁷³

The counterpart in England of the increase in farm size was the expansion of the wage labour force in agriculture. Wage labourers were not unknown in the countryside in the sixteenth century, but during the next two centuries their share of the agricultural labour force increased until most labourers worked exclusively for wages.⁷⁴ The advantage of wage labour was that farmers had to hire only the labour they needed. Workers could be added or shed as circumstances on the farm changed. Farmers could count on being able to employ wage labour only if a sufficiently large pool of labourers working for wages existed. This did not require a 'reserve army' of the unemployed; it only meant that a farmer who could make productive use of labour was able to find workers without having to bid up wages significantly.⁷⁵ Labour could thus be more efficiently allocated across farms than in the case where labourers were tied to particular farms or to particular localities by the availability of short- or long-term access to land.

The creation of a pool of workers not tied to the land and reliant on

France: Malcolmson, *Life and labour*, pp. 114, 127-8; Clay, *Economic expansion*, 1, pp. 78, 81; Stevenson, *Popular disturbance*, pp. 40-3; O'Brien and Keyder, *Economic growth*, pp. 132-3; Hufton, 'Social conflict', pp. 307-8.

⁶⁹ Farmers were also reluctant to meet labourers' demand for security by providing them with allotments, effectively paying them in land. This solution was widely suggested in the early nineteenth century as a way of reducing poor relief expenditures. It was chiefly opposed by labour-hiring farmers because it would make labourers 'too independent', that is, not available when needed and not amenable to supervision: Mingay, *English landed society*, pp. 276-7.

⁷⁰ Armstrong, 'Countryside', p. 88.

⁷¹ Malcolmson, *Life and labour*, pp. 137-9; Neave, 'Rural settlement contraction'.

⁷² Musgrave, *Land and economy*, pp. 94-104.

⁷³ Woolf, *Poor in western Europe*, pp. 56-7; Hufton, *Poor*, pp. 68-92; Ó Gráda, 'Demographic adjustment'; Poitrineau, *Remues d'hommes*; Lucassen, *Naar de kusten*.

⁷⁴ For estimates of the numbers of farmers and wage labourers, see Levine, *Reproducing families*, pp. 40-1.

⁷⁵ Farmers might, in fact, be willing to hoard some labour. If all farmers were likely to want more labour at a certain time, for example, at the harvest, then they might not be able to find enough on the day and would want to reserve labourers in advance by use of annual contracts or some other means.

wage income benefited rural non-agricultural activities as well.⁷⁶ Wage workers did not necessarily care whether they earned their living from ploughing, reaping and threshing or from woodworking, mining, or weaving. The prevalence of wage labour in rural England may help explain why, unlike in other European countries, the gap in labour productivity between the agricultural and industrial sectors disappeared *before* the onset of industrialization.⁷⁷

A stable pool of wage labourers was also important in areas where industry was a major employer. Firms preferred flexibility in their hiring and firing of labour, as long as they could be confident of finding workers when they needed them. Wage labour helped to ensure that workers were employed where their productivity was highest. Problems did arise in areas where a high degree of specialization meant that all firms felt the effects of trade fluctuations. If workers left the area during slumps, firms had a difficult time getting them back during booms. They thus faced the additional costs of training newly recruited labour.⁷⁸

The problem of maintaining a stable wage labour force in either agriculture or industry might have been solved by long-term employment contracts. To deal with the seasonality of agricultural activity, farmers hired some workers on annual contracts, typically taking them on after the harvest and assuring them of employment during the slack season. From the late eighteenth century outdoor relief functioned as a substitute for annual contracts.⁷⁹ Dealing with cyclical fluctuations in the demand for labour was more problematic since contracts had to span the cycle, giving workers a credible guarantee of employment during slumps yet preventing them from deserting their employers during booms.⁸⁰ Such contracts may have been difficult to enforce and beyond the capital resources of farmers or small firms. Where most employers in a given area benefited from a pool of wage labour, collective action provided a way around these difficulties. Local initiatives to reorganize poor relief in many English and European towns from the early sixteenth century onwards can be interpreted in this way.

That English poor relief was a *national* system leads to a straightforward extension of the preceding arguments. Potential migrants had to take account of what might happen to them in times of distress. In England individuals could expect to benefit from the same sorts of life-cycle, seasonal and cyclical

⁷⁶ Poor relief provided a safety net for women wage workers in Colyton: Sharpe, 'Literally spinsters', p. 55.

⁷⁷ Crafts, *British economic growth*, pp. 61-4.

⁷⁸ Boyer takes up the effect of poor relief on labour turnover in industrial areas and stresses the importance of manufacturers being able to shift the burden to other ratepayers. He does not consider that an individual firm may not be able to offer a credible long-term contract that includes employment during some future recession, that it may be cheaper to reduce turnover collectively, and that poor relief may solve the problem of collective action, whether or not there is a subsidy from other property owners. On the use of poor relief to deal with fluctuations in early nineteenth-century England, see Redford, *Labour migration*, p. 92. On the outmigration of industrial workers during crises, see Gutton, *La société et les pauvres*, pp. 84-5.

⁷⁹ Boyer, *Economic history*, pp. 85-149. In Scotland, by contrast, annual contracts remained the norm well into the nineteenth century: Devine, 'Introduction', pp. 1-7.

⁸⁰ An example from coalmining is the pitman's bond, an annual contract, which helped to stabilize highly mobile colliery workforces: Levine and Wrightson, *Making of an industrial society*, pp. 360-5.

assistance in both home and host parish (subject, of course, to the condition of gaining a settlement). The existence of relief in the home parish would tend to discourage migration while its existence elsewhere would encourage movement, with the net result depending on the magnitudes of these two effects. But the implicit comparison here is with a situation in which there was no relief or other form of security in either home or host parish. The more relevant comparison is with the situation on the continent, where the poor depended primarily on assistance from people who knew them—family, neighbours, or local elites. The more impersonal and comprehensive English system did not have such a bias towards the home parish and thus helped promote a more efficient allocation of labour across parishes.⁸¹

The national scope of the English system helped foster the efficient allocation of labour in yet another way. Where relief was not comprehensive, as on the continent, those who were likely to need it had an incentive to migrate to places where it was on offer. Selective migration concentrated the poor in towns, imposed a greater burden on urban institutions, and made for a lower level of relief overall. Such adverse selection among rural-urban migrants certainly occurred in the short term. The poor flocked into the towns at times of harvest failure or commercial crisis.⁸² But longer-term migrants may also have been attracted by relief institutions and by opportunities for begging.⁸³ The national system in England helped avoid these problems by making insurance coverage comprehensive.⁸⁴ This may be one reason why subsistence migration declined from the late seventeenth century and why the remaining subsistence migrants were often outside the relief system, for example, the Irish.⁸⁵

III

While English poor relief was national in coverage, it was administered and financed locally. Local liability for poor relief had implications for the behaviour of those who paid for it. The poor rate was levied on the occupiers of property, but fell ultimately on the owners as lower rents. While there was room for tenant and landlord interests to conflict, over the long term landlords controlled parish policy either directly through their economic and social power or indirectly through their choice of tenants.

The small size of most parishes—in 1831, 12,000 of the 15,000 parishes in England had fewer than 800 inhabitants—meant that landlords and farmers could not ignore the effects on poor rates of their decisions about employment, land tenure, and other matters. In parishes with only a few large landowners this feedback was clearly felt. Where landownership was less concentrated the effect of any individual's decisions on his own poor

⁸¹ Smith, 'Transfer incomes', p. 205; Taylor, 'Impact'.

⁸² Lis and Soly, *Poverty and capitalism*, p. 209; Woolf, *Poor in western Europe*, pp. 8, 90; Jones, *Charity and bienfaisance*, p. 12; Post, 'Nutritional status', pp. 264-7; Fairchild, *Poverty and charity*, p. 108. On the problem in England before the old poor law, see Clay, *Economic expansion*, I, p. 219.

⁸³ McCloy, *Government assistance*, p. 209; Meyer, 'Illegitimates', pp. 253-5, 261-2.

⁸⁴ In addition, the existence of such problems helped maintain the national system: a parish could not be allowed to shirk its duty because of the costs that this would impose on other parishes.

⁸⁵ Clark, 'Migration in England', pp. 238-42.

rates may have been relatively slight. But individuals creating burdens for the community could have been brought into line by formal or informal means. For the moment it will be assumed that the parish's proprietors acted as one. The problems of collective action will be taken up later.

The demand for labour should be greater with poor relief than without. The reason is simple: by employing someone who would otherwise receive relief, the property owner's tax burden fell, so he could afford to pay a wage higher than the actual worth of the work.⁸⁶ This created an incentive to undertake labour-intensive activities, particularly in the winter months when agricultural work was scarce.⁸⁷ If workers could be more fully employed in the slack season, their incomes would be higher and the parish's poor relief burden lower. The significance of this incentive may be seen in Jones's conjecture that of the sizeable net addition to the stock of fixed capital in agriculture during the eighteenth century, much was land remodelling which involved 'the redeployment of the existing farm workforce in slack seasons'.⁸⁸ Labourers could also be put to work mending the roads and improving other local infrastructure.

Ratepayers would similarly have had an incentive to encourage industrial by-employments. The sixteenth-century poor law permitted parishes to maintain a stock of raw materials to be worked up by the poor.⁸⁹ While workhouses have come to be regarded primarily as deterrents to idleness, and most had little economic success, many were initiated with the sincere hope of providing employment and encouraging local industry.⁹⁰ More important than workhouses, and better adapted to the problem of agriculture's seasonality, was the small-scale industrial activity so common in the English countryside.⁹¹ Individual or collective initiatives to put the poor to work lowered the burden of relief expenditure, though this did not, of course, mean that every scheme was worth undertaking.

The implications of the financing of poor relief take on another dimension if property owners have some control over the parish's population. In a purely agricultural parish the denser the population, the stronger the downward pressure on wages and the greater the poverty of labourers. Where no relief liability existed, landlords and farmers benefited from the increased supply of labour and from the lower wages. With tax-financed poor relief they had to consider the costs of population growth and the benefits of containing, or even reversing, it.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries many English property owners recognized the dangers of allowing the parish population to increase.⁹²

⁸⁶ This endogeneity of poor relief expenditures, together with the political power of farmers, underlies Boyer's explanation for outdoor relief, but he focuses on contract choice rather than on overall labour demand: *Economic history*, p. 108.

⁸⁷ Thirsk, 'Agricultural policy', pp. 382-3.

⁸⁸ Jones, 'Agriculture', p. 72.

⁸⁹ Thirsk, *Economic policy*, pp. 65-6, 168; *idem*, 'Agricultural policy', pp. 384-6; Sharpe, 'Literally spinsters', p. 60.

⁹⁰ Innes, 'Prisons', p. 82; Watts, *Social history*, p. 240.

⁹¹ Thirsk, *Economic policy*.

⁹² A clear statement of the incentive appears in Demeny, 'On internalizing', pp. 145-6.

Landlords limited the amount of housing for labourers.⁹³ They prevented the subdivision of farms and encouraged their consolidation.⁹⁴ While poor relief as insurance reduced the demand for smallholdings, the impact of population on poor rates created an incentive to reduce the supply as well. Collectively, property owners also used various means, including the poor laws, to influence sexual behaviour and family formation by the poor.⁹⁵

The incentive to keep parish population under control suggests a selective use of the settlement laws.⁹⁶ Parishes where labour was in short supply should not have been reluctant to grant settlements to workers who could be profitably employed, unless, of course, the resulting downward pressure on wages brought a commensurate increase in relief liabilities. If, on the other hand, those seeking to settle in the parish were likely to increase relief expenditures without adding much to the labour supply, then the parish should have been reluctant to grant them settlements. In practice parishes did use settlement as a device for screening migrants. Those turned away were mainly old people, widows, and families with many children, just the sorts of migrants likely to need relief without contributing much to the labour supply.⁹⁷ Such restrictions on migration were unlikely to have greatly hindered economic growth. Other aspects of English poor relief—the granting of casual help to those without settlements and the willingness of parishes to pay non-resident relief—probably served to *encourage* economically beneficial migration. Both of these practices were widespread in the industrial north, and not unknown in the rest of England.⁹⁸ It is thus not surprising to find that English mobility rates were high relative to those on the continent in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁹⁹

If property owners could not control fully the local population, then there was less incentive to enclose and consolidate. Larger farms employed less labour per unit of land, so enclosure and consolidation were likely to reduce employment and increase relief liabilities.¹⁰⁰ In the short term, hedging and ditching absorbed some additional labour, but enclosures led, at least in some cases, to increased relief expenditures.¹⁰¹ Despite these short-run

⁹³ Clay, 'Landlords and estate management', pp. 236-8. By the late seventeenth century some towns even had regulations against the erection of tenements and the taking in of lodgers: Clay, *Economic expansion*, I, p. 234.

⁹⁴ Allen, *Enclosure*, pp. 49-54.

⁹⁵ Levine and Wrightson, 'Social context', pp. 172-4; Wrightson, 'Nadir', p. 191.

⁹⁶ Snell, *Annals*, p. 93.

⁹⁷ Clark and Souden, 'Introduction', p. 33; Clark, 'Migrants in the city', p. 279; Slack, *English poor law*, pp. 37-9; Huzel, 'Labourer and the poor law', pp. 759, 787-8. See also the recent exchange between Landau, 'Law of settlement'; *idem*, 'Eighteenth-century context'; and Snell, 'Pauper settlement'.

⁹⁸ Taylor, 'Different kind'.

⁹⁹ Clark and Souden, 'Introduction', p. 32. Williamson, *Coping with city growth*, pp. 15, 29-30, 52, stresses that even by the standards of today's developing countries rates of rural-urban migration in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England were quite high.

¹⁰⁰ Allen, *Enclosure*. Contemporary writers on estate management recognized this effect: Clay, 'Landlords and estate management', p. 233.

¹⁰¹ Snell, *Annals*, pp. 194-209. Employment could, of course, rise if reclamation or a shift from pasture to arable increased the cultivated area. But it should be remembered that the factors which led to these changes may well have influenced open field farms as well.

effects, landowners may have believed that in the longer term they could reduce the number of poor in the parish.¹⁰²

Property owners elsewhere in Europe may not have actively encouraged population growth, but they rarely tried to frustrate it. Indeed, they often facilitated population growth by providing access to land and permitting holdings to be divided. An exception, which may prove the rule, was Switzerland where some local communities imposed severe restrictions on marriage and residence by paupers.¹⁰³

The possibility of full-time, as against seasonal, employment outside agriculture also complicated the incentives for rural ratepayers. Property owners in a rural parish without relief liability had to weigh the costs of industrial development—upward pressure on agricultural wages—against the benefits—increased local demand for food and housing, as well as any direct returns, such as rents on mineral deposits. With relief liability they had also to take into account how non-agricultural activities would affect both relief expenditures and the tax base. A mine, for example, attracted immigrants and posed special problems as the result of accidents, illness, and cyclical fluctuations. A parish might resist its development unless the mine's owners agreed either to take care of their own workers' needs or to make special contributions to parish funds.¹⁰⁴ Whether rural ratepayers had an incentive to encourage mining or other industry probably depended on whether the parish already had a population surplus to its agricultural requirements.

Much of what has been said thus far about the implications of local responsibility for relief should not seem particularly surprising since it already figures in the literature on 'close' and 'open' parishes. A close parish was typically controlled by a few large landowners who limited population and shaped agricultural development. In parishes where landowning was less concentrated, population proved more difficult to control and industrial activities were more common.¹⁰⁵

The differences between close and open parishes arose from the difficulties of reconciling the interests of the individual ratepayer with those of ratepayers as a group. The individual ratepayer's decisions about land tenure or employment could impose costs on the other ratepayers. The others were not entirely helpless. They could invoke the settlement and vagrancy laws,

¹⁰² For a detailed case study of how enclosure could be the first step towards the reduction of population, see Broad, 'Verneys', pp. 27-54.

¹⁰³ Braun, *Industrialisation*, pp. 22-7, 122; Head-König, 'Marginalisation', pp. 83-7; *idem*, 'Forced marriages', pp. 456-61. In an effort to limit relief liability some German states and communities also introduced marriage restrictions: Sagarra, *Social history*, p. 165; Knodel, *Demographic behavior*, pp. 124-7. Another exception was Scotland where it became a tenet of improving agriculture in the later eighteenth century to keep 'only that population essential for proper cultivation': Devine, 'Introduction', p. 6.

¹⁰⁴ Mingay's discussion of landlords' direct involvement in industry in the eighteenth century suggests that they were involved mainly in mining and the development of infrastructure: *English landed society*, ch. 8. In the parish of Whickham mineowners made special contributions to poor relief funds: Levine and Wrightson, *Making of an industrial society*, pp. 344-7.

¹⁰⁵ Clay, *Economic expansion*, 1, pp. 97-100; Holderness, '“Open” and “close” parishes'; Mills, *Lord and peasant*, ch. 4; Mills and Short, 'Social change', pp. 90-9.

where feasible, and they could put social pressure on individuals to conform to the ratepayers' general interest.¹⁰⁶ Such methods were most likely to succeed where the number of landowners was small and their interests similar, i.e. in the classic close parish. Where economic interests varied or where there were many proprietors, it was less easy to reach formal or informal agreement to further the general interest.¹⁰⁷

The behaviour associated with open and close parishes is often seen as simply redistributing population growth, industrial activity or poverty among parishes. It would be more appropriate to see the close parish as showing the full economic impact of poor relief where the problem of collective decision making had been solved.¹⁰⁸ The open parish was then an intermediate case between the close parish and the other extreme, where individual actions had no perceptible feedback on the poor rates. This was the case where the parish was very large, where taxation was not local, or where there was no poor relief. In most open parishes there was still some incentive to act in the parish interest; it was simply attenuated by the small size of properties and the difficulties of taking collective decisions.

The local financing of poor relief gave English property owners, individually and collectively, a direct pecuniary interest in ensuring that the parish's demographic and economic development was balanced. This might mean keeping down the supply of labour. Alternatively, it might involve increasing the demand for labour, through capital formation in agriculture or the encouragement of non-agricultural economic activity. Landlords and farmers did not undertake such activities only to escape the payment of poor relief. But their potential relief liabilities gave them an additional incentive to do so.

IV

The comparison of English and continental poor relief has led to a number of hypotheses about the ways in which poor relief helped to shape England's economic development in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The old poor law, it has been argued, underpinned the growth of an economically mobile wage labour force; encouraged the consolidation of farms and facilitated the separation of smallholders from the land; provided local incentives for agricultural capital formation and industrial development; and kept population growth under control. All these elements contributed to the distinctiveness of the English economy on the eve of its industrialization.

This analysis of the old poor law has been rather timeless. It follows from the basic features of a system that, with minor changes, remained in place for almost two centuries. Indeed, the stability of the system may have

¹⁰⁶ Landau, 'Eighteenth-century context', p. 430.

¹⁰⁷ Allen, *Enclosure*, p. 51. Seen in this framework the incentives for the parish as a whole are reasonably well defined, but the problems of reconciling individual and parish incentives and of reaching collective decisions may be multidimensional. Hence the relationship between the number of actors and the result must not be taken as deterministic. In this regard Banks's strictures on the open/closed parish literature seem too harsh: 'Nineteenth-century scandal'.

¹⁰⁸ Wrigley and Schofield note that in 40% of the parishes in their sample three landowners or fewer accounted for over half of the assessed valuation in 1798: *Population history*, pp. 47-8.

contributed to its success, in that both the rich and the poor believed that their rights and obligations would not change. Still, the old poor law did have a beginning and an end, about which something must be said.

Why was the English system of poor relief introduced in the sixteenth century, rather than, say, the thirteenth or the eighteenth? The dissolution of the monasteries and the establishment of the Church of England certainly provided the occasion for institutional change.¹⁰⁹ But the English reforms were not unique: from the 1520s changes in social policy were taking place throughout Protestant and Catholic Europe. Renewed growth of population and industrial changes were putting pressure on labour incomes and leading to social dislocation.¹¹⁰ The increasing numbers of beggars and vagabonds were seen as a threat to the social order, and the rulers of towns and nations sought to contain this threat by measures ranging from outright coercion to conciliation.

The English solution would differ from that in other countries, but it took almost a century for this to become fully clear.¹¹¹ The way in which the system developed—piecemeal in response to crises and with important initiatives from the central government—suggests that the fear of social and political unrest played a major role.¹¹² That the balance of the English system was more conciliatory than coercive may reflect early experience with wage labour, enclosure, and industrial development.¹¹³ Or it may stem from the particular constellation of political power in Tudor and Stuart England. Clay argues that the fear of public disorder led the crown to throw its weight on the side of the peasantry in opposing agrarian change in the late sixteenth century, but that this policy gave way in the seventeenth century to intervention in the grain markets and the enforcement of the poor law.¹¹⁴

If it was not so much economic change as the fear of its consequences (or other social or religious motives) that led to the old poor law, then it was a happy adaptation. Insofar as it did further economic growth, England may have needed less poor relief later, or, alternatively, have been wealthy enough to afford more. This may be a reason why, if the poor law was so advantageous, it was not subsequently adopted elsewhere. When several countries did try to reform their systems of relief in the latter half of the eighteenth century, they found it too costly to establish a similar commitment to relieve distress on a national scale. The growth of population and industrial changes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries put

¹⁰⁹ But on the continuities in the doctrine and practice of poor relief between the late middle ages and the early sixteenth century, see Tierney, *Medieval poor law*, pp. 128-33.

¹¹⁰ Gutton, *La société et les pauvres*, pp. 97-105; Lis and Soly, *Poverty and capitalism*, pp. 84-96.

¹¹¹ Leonard, *Early history*, pp. 293-300.

¹¹² Pound, *Poverty and vagrancy*, p. 81; Clay, *Economic expansion*, I, p. 222; Slack, *English poor law*, pp. 11-26, 57.

¹¹³ On the generally repressive character of French poor relief, see Jones, *Charity and bienfaisance*, pp. 138-9.

¹¹⁴ Clay, *Economic expansion*, I, p. 78; II, pp. 240-2.

the adoption of a comprehensive poor law on the English model beyond the means of other countries.¹¹⁵

The English system itself came under pressure in the early nineteenth century as industrialization greatly changed the problems of poverty.¹¹⁶ The spatial concentration of production led to the decline of many rural industries, leaving pockets of structural poverty to be dealt with by local authorities. The high rates of rural-urban migration and the predominance of young adults in this movement also left rural parishes with disproportionate numbers of children and old people, those most likely to need relief.¹¹⁷ Industrial development reduced the relative importance of agriculture in the economy, but left the burden of poor rates primarily on landed income. Is it surprising, then, that in the 1830s a parliament dominated by landowners managed to impose restrictions on relief expenditure?¹¹⁸ But tax-financed poor relief was not abolished and it took many years to ensure that often unwilling local authorities, both rural and urban, complied with the more restrictive aspects of the new poor law.¹¹⁹

The large and rapid structural changes associated with industrialization brought out the potential weakness of the old poor law. The parish proved to be, in insurance terms, too small to be an effective risk pool. This problem was not unknown before the late eighteenth century: many London parishes faced it continually. But most English parishes were able to adapt to the gradual economic and demographic changes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The system of tax-financed relief gave local authorities both sufficient resources to mitigate the consequences of change and the incentive to shape it so as to ensure the balanced development of population and resources.

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¹¹⁵ Reforms in Austria and the southern Netherlands attempted to extend poor relief in the late eighteenth century, but these initiatives were quickly undermined by high costs: Bonenfant, *Le problème du paupérisme*, pp. 110, 401, 562; Lis and Soly, *Poverty and capitalism*, pp. 205-8, 212-3. On the ambitious, but abortive, schemes enacted in revolutionary France, see Forrest, *French Revolution*.

¹¹⁶ Huzel, 'Labourer and the poor law', pp. 759-64.

¹¹⁷ Williamson, *Coping with city growth*, pp. 15, 22, 34-6.

¹¹⁸ Poynter, *Society and pauperism*, p. 282.

¹¹⁹ Digby, *Poor law*, pp. 19-26.

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