Coping with Risk in the Seventeenth Century

The First Age of the English Old Poor Law: A Regional Study

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THE "OLD" POOR LAW

The English Old Poor Law was unique in early modern history, in that it was a *national* system of poor relief, funded by systematic taxation. It stipulated that each English and Welsh parish (there were around nine thousand at the time) was to collect money from those who could afford to pay, and to redistribute it to those of their poor neighbors who were unable to support themselves. From uncertain and somewhat faltering origins, it became established over the course of the seventeenth century to a point where it was probably transferring around £400,000 a year by the 1690s. This has been calculated as enough to feed about 5% of the population (Slack 1988, 170–173).

Why England developed this system before her neighbors is a difficult question. On the face of it, the challenges faced by the English in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were no more acute than those anywhere else. As with much of Europe, rising population brought falling real wages: the numbers of those in poverty grew (Wrightson 2000). Certain economic and religious factors might have made the situation worse: England's monasteries were dissolved in the 1530s under Henry VIII, removing their traditional role in the support of the needy; the chantries, which supported many institutional forms of relief, were swept away in the 1540s during the more radical Edwardian Reformation (Fideler 2006). England may have been unusually capitalist, too, though this is arguable (Patriquin 2007). Certainly commentators at the time complained of enclosures, rising rents, and the engrossment of farms—though the old argument that these changes destroyed the peasantry can no longer be sustained (Whittle 2013). What seems to have happened is that population growth brought fissures among the

peasantry: wealthy peasants—the "yeomen"—got wealthier, buying new consumer goods and rebuilding their houses into the handsome buildings that survive in the English countryside today (Wrightson 1977). Their poorer neighbors suffered, and it was these who provided the main "constituency" for the Poor Law. But many of these developments can be detected elsewhere in Western Europe. What—perhaps—was unique about England was the nature of the state. She was a unified political entity, with one Parliament and one system of law. Thus the Poor Law depended on statute law, and the political will among the governing class (from the Privy Council to local magistrates right down to parish officers themselves) to impose and manage it (Hindle 2004). Uniquely, it appears, in England this political will for a robust system of poor relief was there.

Central government played a major role in this, although there was also considerable local initiative. The early sixteenth century had seen attempts to encourage voluntary giving to the poor, but as the problem intensified in the latter half of the century Parliament increasingly turned to compulsory rating (local taxation). Important work by Marjorie McIntosh has shown many parishes in the south and east implementing rates and formal relief in the later sixteenth century, but the key acts were those of 1598 and 1601 (the latter slightly modifying the former) (McIntosh 2011). These codified existing laws that provided for a local taxation and support for the impotent poor, as well as for work to be created for those who were unemployed but able-bodied, but they also created an effective mechanism for the system's operation (Slack 1990). Thus the statute of 1601 ordered that overseers of the poor (the parish officers charged with the day-to-day management of the Poor Law) in each parish were to set to work "all such persons, married or unmarried, having no means to maintain them, use no ordinary and daily trade of life to get their living by," and relieve with cash "the lame, impotent, old, blind, and such other among them being poor and not able to work." Poor children, meanwhile, were to be apprenticed (43 Eliz. I, c. 2). This was to be supervised by magistrates, who effectively oversaw the overseers.

The English Poor Law thus created was, in a sense, a classical public good provider, although the exact nature of the "public good" has been a topic of debate. It has variously been credited with helping to foster social stability, end famine, and even underpin the economic risk-taking that allowed a large portion of the English labor force to specialize in industry (Solar 1995, Hindle 2000, Smith 2011). It was also a system in which the regional society played a major role. Setting aside the point that England was a relatively small country, and in population terms little larger than a province of China or of the Ottoman or Mughal Empires (to name but a few), one of the most fundamental tenets of the Poor Law was the devolution of its administration to a set of local institutions. Most fundamentally, its day-to-day operation took place at the parish level (or, in northern England, where parishes could be very large, at the level of the township). These were local, rather than regional, societies, but each parish was only semiautonomous of control from

more obviously "regional" bodies. Most importantly, parishes and townships were subject to the jurisdiction of the magistracy: the body of amateur officials, usually gentry, that administered the English legal system at the regional level (Fletcher 1986). Particularly important were the counties, at which magistrates ("justices of the peace" or "JPs") sat as members of the "county bench," looking after local administration, and presiding over the county courts, known as "Quarter Sessions" (because they sat four times a year). In the early years of the Poor Law, Quarter Sessions played a major role in ensuring the implementation of Poor Law legislation, and throughout the Old Poor Law period (1598 to its drastic alteration by Parliament in 1834), magistrates at Quarter Sessions helped mold local practice by hearing appeals against local judgments on relief and "settlement" (the law that dictated which parish was obliged to relieve whom). By the latter part of the seventeenth century, if not earlier, many counties had devolved much of this business down to relatively new tier of government, the "Petty Sessions division," sometimes coterminous with the old "hundreds" at the subcounty level. Nonetheless, either by counties or by Petty Sessions divisions, the element of regional supervision over the more "local" parishes remained an important part of the Poor Law story. Indeed, it has been suggested—though not without question—that regional cultures of welfare existed by the eighteenth century at least. In the south and east, it is suggested, the regional welfare culture was relatively generous; in the north and west, meanwhile, the culture was one of parsimony (King 2000). Certainly spending per head was lower in northern and western counties, but whether this reflects a frugal regional welfare culture, or different economic needs and possibilities, remains open to debate.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the role of the Old Poor Law as a provider of a public good. Obviously "public good" is a somewhat nebulous concept, but here I will define the key public good provided as the right of people not to starve to death, so long as they were willing (if not necessarily able) to work. This was not a new "right" in the seventeenth century, nor was it unique to England (Swanson 1997). But, with the Poor Law, England made a uniquely thorough attempt in the seventeenth century to turn a theoretical right into a real one. With this in mind, we can examine the reasons people called upon the Poor Law to support them, and use these to create a model of the social function of formal poor relief that will hopefully be useful for comparative purposes. In doing this, I would like to suggest that the prime function of the Poor Law was the provision of social security against personal, and household, economic risk. If the key public good underpinning the Poor Law was the right not to starve, this meant that it worked as a system of social insurance against the uncertainties of a harsh economic environment.

In keeping with the themes of the book, and in order to explore a critical issue, this chapter will focus its evidence on one "region," namely, the historic county of Lancashire in the northwest of England. This was clearly a "regional society" in a

meaningful sense, although it was—of course—neither independent nor uniform. It was, indeed, economically quite diverse: mostly pasture farming, but with a distinction between the rough grazing of the uplands of the Pennines and southern Lake District and the plusher pastures of the lowlands (Walton 1987, Phillips and Smith 1994). It also had areas of good arable land, most notably the Fylde plain on the western seaboard. And it was an area of developing rural industries: woollens in the east, and cotton-using textiles in the southeast. In the southwest there was a growing metalwork industry reliant on local supplies of coal.

The chapter will begin by looking at the nature of Poor Law administration in our "regional society," arguing that county-level institutions were important in determining policy, and highlighting our key sources: petitions by paupers, archived by those county institutions. After this, it will discuss the "economy of makeshifts" in which formal poor relief operated: a term used by historians for the very diverse collection of "survival strategies" deployed by those facing hardship, on top of (but not excluding) application for support from the Poor Law. Next, we will consider what the evidence tells us about the nature of poverty as relieved (or expected to be relieved) by the Poor Law. Then, finally, I would like to say something about the role of the Poor Law in bringing about the end of famine in England, something that took place in the seventeenth century, at around the same time as the implementation of the Poor Law. I would like to suggest that this was not a coincidence. Indeed, Lancashire, as a regional society subject to famine until relatively late, constitutes a very valuable case study of this development.

LANCASHIRE AS A "REGIONAL SOCIETY"

Although England was unified by a monarchy, a parliament, and a system of law, it was also—in some senses—a patchwork of regions. Counties remained crucial focal points for peoples' political and social activities, particularly in the case of the landed gentry (for a sceptical discussion of this, see Holmes 1980). More generally, people were conscious that their lives were bounded by what was usually called their "country." This word has evolved to mean, in contemporary English, something akin to the "nation-state," but in the early modern period the word "country" usually referred to a smaller area, often unified by some economic or administrative characteristic. Famously, Wiltshire had its "chalk" country and its "cheese" country. Daniel Defoe, visiting the Sheffield area in the early eighteenth century, wrote about the "country called Hallamshire" (Hey 2016, 1–4). Such examples could be multiplied.

Where these regional units had administrative functions, most obviously in the case of counties but also with hundreds, Petty Sessions divisions, and other units, they played a major role in the formulation of Poor Law policy. In the early years of the system, counties and divisions can be seen directing parishes within their respective jurisdictions (Lister 1888, Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts

1905). In the 1630s, with the royal government pushing for local enforcement, the Privy Council ordered justices in their divisions to push on with the implementation of the Poor Laws, and to report back (Quintrell 1980). Meanwhile, county government was crucial to the reimplementation of formal poor relief in the aftermath of the first Civil War (1642–1646), albeit this time under pressure from below (Hindle 2008). Nonetheless, the growth of poor relief was always driven by a dynamic interaction between national regional and local institutions. Each component was important.

In Lancashire, the administrative landscape was perhaps especially complex (Healey 2010a). Because parishes were very large, the fundamental unit of administration gradually became the township—an old subdivision of the parish. Confusingly, parishes did still maintain a role in some areas, especially where the level of poverty was uneven across a large parish, and thus the parish served as a useful mechanism for redistribution of expenditure across space. These were then subject to higher jurisdictions: most immediate were Petty Sessions divisions, which covered a group of parishes, and theoretically met as a body of magistrates every six weeks. Above these were the institutions of the county, although because Lancashire was quite large and suffered relatively poor communications these county institutions actually met in four separate locations: at Lancashire for the north of the county, at Preston for the middle areas, at Manchester for the southeast, and alternating between Wigan and Ormskirk for the southwest. In addition, Lancashire's justices met to discuss administration at "Sheriff's Table," during the biannual visitation by the Assize judges on circuit out of London.

Central to the operation of this administrative web was the system of appeal, often by petition, whereby those with a grievance against some local decision took their case to higher institutions. Crucially, decisions made in townships could be appealed upward. Increasingly, it would seem that Petty Sessions divisions were taking these cases on, but happily for historians, Quarter Sessions heard many thousands of these cases across the seventeenth century. Thus, from the end of the Civil War to the first decade of the eighteenth century magistrates heard an average of nearly fifty new cases relating to the relief of individual paupers coming up to Quarter Sessions every year. On top of this, they also dealt with appeals for habitation orders and settlement cases. Of course, compared to the number of people relieved in the county without such appeals, these are small numbers, but these were likely to have been the most contested, borderline cases. They could thus set important precedents. Appeals also generated documentation, and in some cases, actual petitions survive.

ASKING FOR POOR RELIEF

These surviving petitions are the crucial sources for this chapter. Some 3,169 initial petitions survive for the county (i.e., excluding those whose case had already been

heard and were thus contesting some aspect of a former order). In order to understand the importance of these as sources, it is worth noting how they differ from other material relating to the English Poor Law (Healey 2014). The system of parochial poor relief was, quite apart from anything else, an impressive bureaucracy. In theory, each parish or township was to write up lists of both taxpayers and recipients of poor relief. At least from the middle decades of the seventeenth century, it seems that the majority of parishes did this. Only a minority of these survive, but where they do they are extremely useful sources, and historians have used them to recover local poor relief policies, and some data about the number and nature of the poor in receipt of relief. The big problem, of course, is that such accounts are records of relief rather than poverty. They can tell us *what* people got, but they do not necessarily tell us *why* they needed it. For this, historians have had to be more creative. Sometimes, they have used the (sadly rare) pauper censuses that survive for some English towns. Because these often collected more data about recipients (such as information about earnings, family sizes, or infirmities) they can be mined for insights into the question of who got poor relief (Pound 1971, Slack 1975, Healey 2010b). Alternatively, historians have deployed "nominal record linkage" (the linking of names found in Poor Law records with those in other sources) to gain similar insights. In particular, they have linked records of Poor Law payments to "family reconstitutions," which give basic demographic data about parishioners. This is a time-consuming methodology, and it is subject to some important source biases—most notably its difficulty in "seeing" the migrant poor—but it has nonetheless underpinned some important and influential studies of poverty and its relief (Wales 1984, Newman-Brown 1984, Williams 2011).

An issue with all of these sources is that they are "top down": that is, they do not give the poor a voice of their own. In recent years, historians of the Old Poor Law have developed a much greater interest in sources that record some element of the "voices" of the poor (Hitchcock, King, and Sharpe 1997). For the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there now exists a vibrant literature on pauper letters— sources generated when a pauper who lived in a parish different from their place of formal "settlement" applied back to that parish of settlement for relief (Sokoll 2001). These are incredible sources, which in many cases appear to have actually been written by the paupers themselves. None, or very few, survive for the seventeenth century, but for this period there are sometimes archives of pauper petitions, such as the many thousands that survive for Lancashire. In most cases, these petitions were created when a poor individual had been refused relief by their parish or township, and were thus appealing over the heads of local officers to the magistracy in the hope of a more favorable hearing. In the process, the pauper described what conditions had left them in poverty, as well as (sometimes) giving information about their strategies of *avoiding* destitution.

They need to be read carefully, however. So far as can be seen, petitions of the period were rarely actually written by the poor. They were at best "hybrid voices"

in which the stories of the poor were transmitted to paper and thus to the court and to history by the scribe. Indeed, they follow a well-established epistolary form, starting with a salutation, following with a narrative of the reasons for poverty, and ending with an appeal to the conscience and benevolence of the magistrates, and usually an offer to pray for their soul (Jones and King 2015). They are instrumental documents: they had a specific political purpose—getting a dole—which means they are not objective records of the past. Nor are they necessarily a representative sample of the poor themselves: they normally refer to cases in which the pauper had been refused relief in the first instance. As has been noted, they were probably representative of the most controversial cases.

This all said, petitions—particularly their narrative section, in which the would-be pauper set out the reasons for her or his poverty—present an exciting opportunity for historians to explore why some people needed poor relief, and what they expected of the Old Poor Law. Before we do this, though, we need to say something about issues of reliability. Clearly, as these were instrumental documents, they cannot necessarily be taken as unproblematic records of "historical truth." Rather, they are a representation of poverty aimed at provoking sympathy and (ultimately) a dole. Nonetheless, petitioners were subject to a series of checks, which likely prevented them from lying outright. As petitioners tended to be illiterate, the scribe would have acted as a potential moral check on any obvious falsehoods. Meanwhile, petitioners appear to have been expected to present petitions in person, and to have been subjected to some kind of cross-examination in court. Moreover, townships aggrieved by particularly serious falsehoods could themselves appeal successful petitions, allowing them to present contrary evidence. In most cases, petitions seem to have been successful, and not to have generated an appeal: this probably speaks to their general accuracy as a record of individual hardships. Finally, even if we refuse to trust a single statement in any of the petitions as representative of historical "truth," then they still exist as representations of deserving poverty: they can be taken, at the very least, as powerful statements of what people *expected* the Poor Law to do. The remainder of this chapter will tackle this question in more detail, focusing on the evidence contained in the Lancashire petitions. It first points out that formal poor relief existed as one part of a wider "economy of makeshifts," before discussing the kinds of economic misfortune that brought people to need poor relief, and then finally exploring the suggestion that the Old Poor Law was an important factor in the disappearance of famine from England in the seventeenth century.

THE "ECONOMY OF MAKESHIFTS"

It has become clear in the last couple of generations of Poor Law scholarship that formal poor relief was just one way in which those in poverty supported themselves (Ben-Amos 2000, Boulton 2000, King and Tomkins 2003, Muldrew and

King 2003, Hindle 2004, 15–95, Ben-Amos 2008). The petitions, for example, show paupers getting help from their kin, or neighbors. Grace Rydings of Heywood, for example, told in 1656 that she

> hath been sick about two months and having but 3d a week allowance was enforced to go abroad for relief and coming to one James Hardman's house being in the parish of Middleton for an alms *[sic]* was so sick and weak that she could not go again into the parish of Bury neither hath any place of abode but for the space of 12 days hath been at the said James Hardman's house and put him to cost and trouble. (LA, QSP/124/18)

Sometimes petitioners worked for small wages. Anthony Higginson of Priest Hutton recalled in 1656 that, when able of body, he had undertaken "so hard a labour or another lawful calling as killing of foxes, badgers and other devouring creatures which he much used when he was not otherwise employed" (LA, QSP/129/5). Some, meanwhile, admitted to begging for alms, though they might profess a reluctance to keep doing so. In 1663, for example, Jane Seed of Ribchester stated that she went begging for relief, but was "ashamed" to have to do so (LA, QSP/234/16). Others still stated that they had sold their possessions: land, cows, even the clothes from their back, to pay for their relief (Healey 2014).

The existence of such strategies of "making shift" is, of course, well attested by existing scholarship. Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, for example, has shown how "gifts and favours" were crucial to social relations at all levels of wealth (Ben-Amos 2000, Ben-Amos 2008). The importance of formal charity as part of a "mixed economy of welfare" was emphasized most effectively by Joanna Innes, while a recent project has done much to recover the importance of almshouses to the support for the vulnerable (Innes 1996, Broad 1999, Goose, Caffrey, and Langley 2016). Meanwhile, although there is surprisingly little evidence for it in the Lancashire petitions, it has long been supposed that the poor were often able to make use of common land to help make ends meet (Neeson 1993).

Slightly ambiguously, formal poor relief existed as part of this "economy of makeshifts," and there is no necessary reason to think that paupers saw the taking of relief from the parish as especially different from taking it from their neighbors as charity. But formal relief also clearly existed in part to plug the gaps in this "economy of makeshifts." It is, for example, implicit in petitions that one of the reasons people might need parish support was that their attempts to "make shift" had failed. They needed relief because they had no kin, because their neighbors were exhausted, because they had sold all their goods and had none left, or because they were too sick to beg relief from door to door. It is thus possible to argue that one of the functions of poor relief was to provide support where structural changes were making the wider "economy of makeshifts" less capable of supporting the marginal population. So, as enclosure removed common land, as people moved more and perhaps fractured their relationships with kin and neighbors, or

as certain industries ebbed and flowed (perhaps most obviously the destruction of hand spinning at the end of the eighteenth century), in each of these cases formal poor relief picked up some of the slack. More generally, this emphasizes the point that poor relief existed within a wider social environment: need was dictated not just by the availability of resources, but also by cultural norms. It was accepted, as we shall see, that women should earn less than men, and this patriarchal assumption had consequences for the nature of poverty: it meant you were more likely to be poor if you were female (Bennett 1992). Ethical considerations, particularly notions of distributional justice, were also a part of this: petitioners might ask for relief "as may stand with justice and equity and as is usual in such cases," or they might claim their circumstances were "fitter for a swine then a Christian who is of the age of 65 years and lame" (LA, QSP/52/14; QSP/129/5; cf. QSP/197/15; QSP/570/2). Such statements betoken ethical ideas about acceptable and unacceptable levels of deprivation, and these clearly conditioned peoples' expectations of the Poor Law.

THE CAUSES OF POVERTY

The key pieces of information in petitions, though, are the causes of poverty reported by the petitioner. The main ones mentioned were old age, sickness, and family breakdown.

Forty-three percent of the petitioners complained of old age. This, they said, brought crippling decrepitude—failing eyesight, reduced mobility. William Oldham of Heaton Norris summed the problem up when he claimed poverty in 1691 through the "weakness in body and other infirmities always attending upon old age." He was eighty-two (LA, QSP/699/3). The key problem was simply that it was very hard for the aged to earn their living. John Burrow of Skerton was explicit about this in 1649 when he complained that "of late infirm and decrepit old age hath taken his work from him that he cannot neither will people have him to work as formerly" (LA, QSP/9/2). Alice Simpson, also of Skerton, petitioned in 1658 that she was "now far stricken into years, and of late grown blind, so that she is not any longer able to labour for her liveing or to help herself in any sort" (LA, QSP/153/7). Such examples could be multiplied many times over.

Neither were falling incomes the only problem. Senility and weakness of body also meant that individuals needed help to complete previously simple domestic tasks. Sometimes this help could be offered as charity by well-meaning neighbors, but if this was not available domestic assistance had to be paid for. Jane Bridge of Fazakerley, for example, pleaded in 1662 that she was "now somewhat aged & grown so infirm & weak of body, that your petitioner is not able to work for her living, & many times your petitioner's said weakness is so extreme that had she meat your petitioner were not able to feed herself" (LA, QSP/223/20). And in 1694, William Makater of Upholland provided a graphic image of old age, with him

"now scarce able to perform a day's work, and his wife so extreme impotent that she is scarce able to crawl or go about" (LA, QSP/742/2).

Around 50%, on the other hand, claimed poverty on account of being ill. In fact, "old age" and "sickness" were clearly sometimes related, and it may well be that in some senses they were seen as two sides of a broader concept of bodily "impotence." Although this is an idea that awaits its historian, the notion of the poor, impotent body was probably a crucial cultural idea underpinning poor relief in the period. Among those who were not also old, this figure was 55%. Given the vagueness of the petitions, and the unsophisticated medical knowledge of the time, we cannot read too much into the different diseases reported. Lameness and blindness were very common complaints, but others told of palsies, agues, the King's Evil (scrofula), falling sickness, and mental incapacity. Elizabeth Dandy of Tarleton told JPs in 1701 that she was troubled with "a mazyness in her head that she is ready to fall if she doth not support herself by taking hold of some table or stool to help her" (LA, QSP/860/51). Isabel Hardman of Manchester had—in 1699—"a melancholy man to her husband," and as a result "none of your petitioners family hath had or eaten any bread for the space of 3 days last past" (LA, QSP/833/18). One couple suffered a "surfeit of cold," while another man told of being "very sore broken in his private parts" (LA, QSP/828/37; QSP/630/17). Anne Orrell of Pemberton was given poor relief in 1700 after being poisoned by her lover, the toxin being administered in a cup of sugary water he had given her to toast their marriage (LA, QSP/848/17). Pregnancy, while not—of course—a sickness, was often written about in similar terms: in its final stages it acted as a form of bodily infirmity, reducing one's ability to work. In 1688, Elizabeth Renshaw of Stretford petitioned that she had been widowed, and was great with child, and "is not able to work any longer by reason of her bigness with child" (LA, QSP/646/4). Just under 2% of petitioners referred to current or recent pregnancy.

Petitions also recounted cases of people suffering mental disabilities, including those from birth, and those of more recent onset. One of the most vivid examples is Mary Hill of Manchester, who in 1706 told of how her husband "has been melancholy for thirty years last past and now is wholly distracted and raving mad," leaving her fully "employed in attending and looking after him" (LA, QSP/945/5). Others told of accidents. In 1658, John Singleton—a servant from Broughton-in-Amounderness—needed poor relief after he was lamed by falling off a ladder (LA, QSP/162/1). John Renshall of Stretford claimed in 1655 that he was doubly unlucky. He had been blind in one eye for ten years, having been "at work making hedge for Sir Cecil Trafford, Knight, hastily stooping down chanced to hit his [other] eye upon an hazel stick & thereby lost the sight thereof" (LA, QSP/120/8). There were also cases of injuries in coal mines and one petitioner who was hurt building a bridge (e.g., LA, QSP/224/6).

The third major stated cause of poverty was household breakdown. Some 40% of petitions referred to being single, either through widowhood or, in many cases,

through simple abandonment. This was a more serious problem for women than men, indeed only two male petitioners told of being abandoned by their wives (though several did mention being widow*ers*). The problems of family breakdown were essentially twofold. First, in a society that tended to ascribe fairly inflexible economic roles to men and women, families needed to pool what were then thought of as "male" and "female" activities. Hence the difficulty felt by widowed husbands. John Howard of Chadderton is a good example. He petitioned in 1670 that

> his vocation is what he can get with following and driving of two little horses loaded with coals or other loading what he can procure from one place to another, so as your petitioner by his calling is much forced to bee from his children and cannot be without someone amongst his children to dress and order them. (LA, QSP/360/13)

Second, marriage served as a form of risk-pooling in a difficult economic environment. Two incomes were always better than one. William Nicholson of Ulverston recounted in 1659 that, as he aged and his eyesight failed, his wife had been "his helper and the best comfort he had under God" (LA, QSP/173/7). And expressing the same sentiment from a rather different angle was Thomas Singleton of Wharles, who in 1660 lamented that he and his wife had become so destitute that "neither of them [were] able to look to one another when in any sickness or misery" (LA, QSP/198/36). Ultimately, though, family breakdown *was* gendered: it was a more serious occurrence for women than it was for men. This was an issue of culture and social structure: England was a patriarchal society where the earning power of women was lower than that of men.

Children were another element that could unbalance the family economy. It is not easy to get much meaningful quantitative information from the petitions, because paupers appear to have mentioned children who had evidently already left home. But it is worth noting that 43% of the petitioners mentioned having one or more children—and some had quite impressively large families: nine or ten children in a handful of cases.

Rather less frequent, but still important, were those who told of being unemployed—or faced with what we might call a "cost of living crisis"—and those who had suffered some environmental misfortune such as fire, flood, or theft. John Leigh of Walton-le-Dale is an example of the latter. He petitioned in 1678 that he and his wife were

> now reduced into poverty by reason of the two late great floods which happened in Walton aforesaid about the 11th of September a year ago at which time your petitioner lost ten acres & a half of wheat, barley, & oats besides the washing down of your petitioner's hedges and your petitioner further sheweth that your petitioner the year after for bread, corn, seed & other necessaries became indebted in the sum of fifty pounds by reason whereof your poor petitioner is clearly ruined & undone. (LA, QSP/483/7)

As for economic crises, the best thing is to count the number of petitions received on over time, and to look for peaks. There were peaks in 1638, 1647–1650, 1657–1662, 1674–1675, and 1699–1700. During these, it was not uncommon for petitioners to complain of high prices, or of the lack of available work, or simply of the "hardness of the times." In 1648, for example, William Ward of Alkrington reported that he and his wife were "especially now of late by reason of the scarcity of bread & hardness of the times both of them . . . brought into extreme want & misery" (LA, QSP/8/7). "I have but very little work," Rebecca Hopwood told Manchester JPs in 1699, "and everything is very dear" (LA, QSP/828/31).

Essentially, then, the fact petitioners were asking for support in times of family breakdown, sickness, old age, and other crises suggests that they construed the Poor Law as a system of support in the face of certain forms of economic risk. What unified these risks was that they caused people either to need more money or to have more difficulty in earning money, and that they occurred through no fault of the petitioner. The Poor Law was, then, a form of public good that provided support for people in the face of misfortune (if we can, indeed, describe old age—or having "too many" children—as misfortune). This fits with, and indeed expands upon, the work of scholars—such as, recently, Samantha Williams—who have emphasized the importance of "life-cycle poverty," in other words, poverty that hits households at certain semipredictable moments in the family life-cycle (youth, old age, widowhood, and a period in middle age when families were "overcharged with children" [Williams 2011]). It is also worth noting the concept of "nuclear hardship" (Laslett 1988). This emphasizes the importance of the nuclear household in early modern England, stressing its autonomy and weak interactions with kin, and posits this as a reason for the reliance in England on the "collectivity" to provide insurance against starvation. This argument has been questioned, on the grounds that kin interactions were not necessarily as weak as once thought, and because the English household was perhaps more flexible than the model allowed (Reay 1996). But, at its fundamentals, it is hard to argue against the idea that those in receipt of poor relief needed it, in part, because their kin networks were unable to protect them from misfortune. The Poor Law can thus be seen as providing a public good that—arguably—in other societies may have been provided by more flexible forms of household formation and by kin.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF FAMINE

England suffered its last famine in 1623, and even this was a regional affair. We know relatively little about famine in earlier periods, although there was clearly major crisis in the years around 1315–1321, a famine in 1438, and recurrent crises in the reign of Henry VIII (Kershaw 1973, Pollard 1989, Sharp 2016). There is evidence for starvation, even in Westminster, in the late 1550s, although this is hard

to disentangle from a much wider set of epidemics at the end of that decade. We get onto safer ground in the later sixteenth century, once we have access to vital registration data in the form of parish registers, and studies have suggested severe hunger coupled with an epidemic (perhaps typhus) in 1587–1588, a famine in 1597, and a regional famine in 1623 (Appleby 1978, Walter and Schofield 1989). After this, there were no more English famines, despite periods of bad harvests in the later 1640s, the 1690s, and at other times. In the 1720s, high prices coincided with high mortality, but this was explicitly considered an epidemic by contemporaries, and the geography of mortality does not fit what we would expect from a famine (Healey 2008). Other countries, within the British Isles and beyond, continued to suffer famines long after England had stopped doing so (Ó Gráda 2009). Scotland suffered widespread starvation throughout the seventeenth century, and especially during the "Ill Years" of the 1690s. Ireland, of course, remained famine prone in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The worst famine was probably that of 1740–41, known as the "Year of Slaughter." In Europe, famines continued to occur into the eighteenth century, although they were in decline by the early nineteenth. The history of famine in Asia and Africa is long and heartbreaking.

England, then, was unusual in its early "escape" from famine, something that demands explanation. Partly, no doubt, it was a reflection of growing wealth, and growing purchasing power on the international grain market. Improved local distribution networks, greater crop diversity, and of course access to colonial sources of food (including Ireland) undoubtedly also helped. The role of government is less clear. Ironically, indeed, formal government intervention in the grain market largely ceased at around the time that famine did, so it is hard to argue that this was a successful weapon in the war on hunger (Outhwaite 1981).

The Poor Law, on the other hand, seems likely to have had a role. There is, indeed, considerable circumstantial evidence for this. The geography of the spread of poor relief, for example, seems to fit quite well with the retreat of famine. In the 1590s, at a time when formal poor relief was only weakly implanted, even in the South, famine was general. By 1623, formal poor relief appears to have been much better established in the South, but hardly so in the North. That year, famine hit the North, but not the South. After 1623, formal poor relief became more solidly embedded in northern parts; the dearths of 1630–1631, 1637, and 1647–1650 were ridden out without mass starvation. There is evidence from poor accounts that relief costs could and did rise to meet peaks in the price of food. At Amersham (Buckinghamshire), for example, overseers in 1631 gave additional money to their poor "which have not of the weekly collection to buy corn in the time of dearth" (CBS, PR4/12/2, 41). In 1730, William Stout of Lancaster reported, "[t]he last year, being a dearth of corn, increased the poor, so that our poor tax was advanced from one hundred to two hundred pounds a year" (Stout 1967, 207). Moreover, as we have seen, the record of the Lancashire petitions shows very noticeable peaks in 1637, 1647–1650, 1658–1662, 1674–1675, and 1699: all of these were years of high prices.

If we are to postulate a relationship between the English Poor Law and the decline of famine, then we might also speculate as to how this relationship might have worked. Most obviously the Poor Law had the power to prop up people's "exchange entitlements" (Sen 1981). Thus, where food was available but was simply unaffordable (because of either high prices or low incomes), transfer payments through the Poor Law might ensure that everyone could eat. A more subtle reason, though, might relate to the impact of the Poor Law on migration patterns during crises. Disease was, it seems, usually the major proximate killer in famines. In Continental Europe, it has been pointed out, institutions of charity and formal poor relief tended to be strongly centered on the cities and towns (Smith 2011). This meant that, when poor harvests struck, the poor were forced to flee to urban centers to get poor relief, and as they did so they crowded in poorly sanitized suburbs. This dislocation, and particularly the movement of underfed people to crowded areas, greatly exacerbated the spread of disease, and thus of famine mortality. In England, by contrast, poor relief was available at home, even in rural parishes. This meant there was less imperative to migrate in search of succor, and thus disease spread less readily. Such a relationship makes logical sense, and indeed was sometimes visible to contemporaries. The town of Lamport in Somerset, for example, clearly saw the failure of poor relief as potentially leading to the spread of disease. During a plague outbreak in 1641 they complained to Bath Assizes that a tax for the relief of the poor was not being paid, "whereby the poore inhabitants of the said towne are like to famish or to breake into partes adjacent for releefe which may scatter a further infection" (Cockburn 1971, 4).

There is, of course, no reason that the two explanations are mutually exclusive. Both, however, do depend on there being enough food going around for everyone to eat. The Poor Law can only, therefore, be part of an explanation for the disappearance of famine; improved food security must have been important too. But it seems a strong likelihood that a robust, national system of transfers to the poor played a considerable role.

COPING WITH RISK

The Poor Law provided security against economic misfortune for everyone who was prepared to work. Given the character of the economy of early modern England this misfortune usually entailed bodily infirmity through either old age or sickness—"impotence" in the language of the time—but it could also encompass the exposure to economic hardship through the death of a spouse. This was serious for women and men, but it was always more serious for the former. The Poor Law helped protect against misfortune, but that misfortune itself was a product of the social and cultural landscape of the age. It was conditioned by the nature of the economy, by the demographic environment, by cultural notions of social justice and of the role of kin, and of course by the dead hand of patriarchy. Within this,

though, the public good ultimately provided by the Poor Law was social security against misfortune.

The role of the "regional society" in the provision of this public good was, however, somewhat ambiguous. There were, of course, many different entities that could claim to be "regional societies" in England, including counties, hundred, Petty Sessions divisions, older territorial units such as Baronies, and even some of the larger parishes. The sheer "localness" of Poor Law administration should never be underestimated: each parish—in large measure—set its own policies based on local conditions. The character of the local economy and the local availability of non–Poor Law charitable resources both colored the response to poverty in each individual parish (Broad 1999). Nonetheless, the focus here on county records, heard by magistrates, emphasizes the importance of regional institutions. These, because they had clear policy influence, helped implant a regional dimension to the operation of poor relief. The early modern "regional society" *was* undoubtedly an influence on the provision of this particular public good.

What the developmental impact of the provision of social security as a public good was is hard to say, but it is nonetheless worth asking. England was not, of course, the only country that provided such a safety net, though at this point it seems to have been the only country that operated a national, tax-funded system of poor relief based on the redistribution of cash to the needy poor. It seems likely that it played a role in the contemporaneous disappearance of famine. Whether it also helped underpin the industrial development that was just starting and was to transform England, Britain, and the world in two centuries will have to remain a matter for speculation.

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