

Society at the Margins

Who were the Poor?

Structural vs conjunctural poverty (the permanent and potential poor > 15-40%)
Vulnerable stages of the life cycle (e.g. childhood, parenthood, old age, illness)
Immigrants without support systems (charity begins at home)
Conventional distinction between the *deserving* (legitimate 'objects of charity') and the *undeserving* (objects of fear, hatred and discipline), underpinned by scripture
Emergence of the 'shame-faced poor' (*poveri vergognosi*)

Strategies for coping with poverty ('makeshift economies')

Support from family, neighbourhood, individual charity, guilds
Mobility in search of (seasonal) work, food, charity (migrant poor)
Improvised careers e.g. street pedlars, beggars (professional)
Association with crime, prostitution

Medieval attitudes to poverty

Charity a virtue and some religious reverence for poverty e.g. mendicant friars.
Poverty as part of the social order (the labouring poor as a 'class?').
Increasingly critical attitude towards idleness: almsgiving to the deserving, whipping and branding for the vagrant.
The poor as a potential threat.

Changes in attitudes to poverty

Demographic pressures, food scarcity, famine and revolt.
C16th emergence of regimes of social welfare, consolidating and bureaucratising existing charitable practice.
Influence of Christian humanism – Juan Luis Vives' *De subventionem pauperum*, 1526.
Capitalism – promotes view poverty not natural but result of human (in)action.
Religious reform – Protestant devaluation of good works, personal responsibility.
Greater emphasis on discrimination (badging) and discipline.

New regimes of social welfare

Growth of state intervention: surveys and censuses (Venice 1527, Norwich 1570, Toledo 1598); in England, local taxation from 1598.
Rationalisation of poor relief by secular authorities e.g. towns like Lyon, Bruges.
Both Catholic and Protestant regimes (Pullan on Venice).
Expulsions of non-local and vagrant poor.
Criminalisation of begging; branding of vagrants; stigmatisation of poor.
But also new charitable impulse e.g. in Italy philanthropy to redeem sinners.
Foucault's 'grand enfermement' (great confinement/enclosure) as authorities sought to clear streets; basis of work-houses, penal institutions/ 'bridewells'.
Cf Jütte: 'The basic tenets and programmes of any poor relief system reflect the values of the society in which the system functions'.

Criminalisation of society

Many early modern crimes (homicide, theft) familiar to us, others (bigamy, witchcraft, swearing) less so.
Expanding scope of criminal jurisdiction: more capital crimes, more hangings.

Most crimes against property rather than person, but increasing severity of criminal justice system: the state more violent than those who committed crimes?.

Gradual decline of 'social theory of necessity' (theft justified in cases of starvation) to growth of 'bloody code' designed to defend private property at all costs by c.1750.

Criminalisation of certain groups for unstable, immoral lifestyle, e.g. prostitutes, gypsies.

Vagrants in foreign pay blamed for malicious acts of arson (along with witches, Dillinger cf 'terrorists' of early modern age).

Gypsies/Roma

Relatively novel presence in western Europe (from C15th).

Suspected involvement in property crime (horse-stealing, pick-pocketing).

Itinerant lifestyle, exotic appearance and activities (fortune-telling, gambling etc) made suspect.

Easy target for expulsion; transportation to colonies C18th [cf Slaves – dynamic Mediterranean trade, Muslims & Christians, overtaken by transAtlantic by C18th].

Prostitutes

Broadly tolerated in Middle Ages, taxed, legalised brothels.

Impact of Protestant and Catholic Reformations made less acceptable, driven underground.

Other women police activities, e.g. Marseille.

'A Harlot's Progress' (Hogarth 1730s) charted dangers, relatively sympathetic portrait?

Sexual deviants

Chiefly sodomy (wide-ranging term for 'unnatural' practices), phase rather than lifestyle, practice notorious in northern Italian cities of Venice and Florence.

In theory, harshest of penalties applied, in practice often lesser charge.

'Molly houses' of C18th London (mission of Society for Reformation of Manners to close down brothels).

Sexual relationships between women lesser concern unless challenged patriarchy.

Dishonourable Trades

Less scandalous role of 'dishonourable trades', e.g. executioner, skinner, latrine-cleaner, grave-digger (Stuart on Germany).

Socially ostracised, but essential socio-economic role > far from marginal.

Own subculture: intermarried, passed occupations on, lived in restricted areas.

Essentially status more symbolic than actual.

Historians 'centring the margins' > greater degree of agency.

Jews and Muslims

'Good fences make good neighbours':

❖ Rome, 1555, Jewish ghetto opened by Pope Paul IV

❖ Livorno: Jewish merchants and bankers crucial in the development of the city.

Bagni: community of Muslim rowers, with Mosques and leaders.

❖ Venice and the Ottomans: only Venice had a recognised Muslim community. (Fondaco, walled compound, a unique case). The Ottomans were Venice's most important international partner.

The conflict was never religious or political, but always commercial.