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Mark R. Cohen

Introduction: Poverty and Charity in Past Times

The problem of poverty and charity across historical space has rarely been approached from an interdisciplinary, cross-theological, comparative perspective. Research since the 1960s has focused almost entirely on the Christian world—medieval and early modern Europe and, to a lesser extent, Byzantium. Until recently, this aspect of Judaism and Islam has gone virtually unstudied. The collection of essays that follows, however, offers an unprecedented opportunity to compare diachronically how Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have dealt with poverty and charity throughout history.

The study of poor relief involves several disciplines—including (at the very least) theology, sociology, and economics—to discuss (for example) the influence of religious beliefs on economic and social behavior. The importance of interdisciplinary investigation emerges from the present collection in the form of questions, if not answers: Are poor-relief systems inspired by the pious desire to build a compassionate society, or are they primarily reactions to economic pressures, demographic trends, or the desire to win social status? The articles demonstrate the broad range of historical methodologies available for the study of poverty and charity, depending on individual scholars' approaches and the nature of the evidence at hand.

One thing that the articles show is that each of the faith-based communities had a slightly different conception of poverty and a distinctive definition of charity, even if they all shared basic assumptions and questions during the medieval and early modern periods. Religious ideology guided the actions of benefactors but so did aspirations for power and prestige, strengthening religious

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solidarity, and desires to help the vulnerable. Differences between the faiths in the realm of theory are scant; all three religions taught that poverty could not be eliminated; giving to the needy was a pious act. The major distinctions concerned who exactly was worthy of charity, who exactly was obligated to give it, and what form charity was to take. Individuals and communities had to decide about the scope of their beneficence.

Both Jewish and Christian scriptures recognized poverty as an inherent part of the human condition, regardless of time, space, society, and culture: “There will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: Open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land” (Deuteronomy 15:11). “The poor are always with you” (Matthew 26:11). Accordingly, each of the articles herein makes an implicit claim that the study of poverty in any period or culture can inform the study of it in others. But the collection does more than enlarge the history of poverty as a whole. It suggests foundational structures of poverty/charity that inform a broad theoretical framework.

How successful was religious philanthropy in meeting the needs of the poor? Is modern secular philanthropy simply continuing a long-standing tradition? Or is it the result of new variables that mark a discontinuity in the timeline? Motivations for giving to the poor in the faith-based communities of the past included the spiritual welfare of the giver; no one in the Middle Ages believed that charity could eliminate poverty once and for all, or even that its intention was to do so. Even in the early modern period in Europe, however, when secular charity began to enter the picture, the realistic goal was to control poverty, not to eradicate it. Moreover, many modern philanthropists, even those operating through secular channels, may well have traditional religious reasons for their charitable activities. Yet, does the impulse to aid one’s fellow man spring from a categorical imperative to which both religious and secular values point, though they filter it through their own ideologies?

The limitations of religion’s ability to achieve complete freedom from poverty may say something about those of modern states as well. Religion may not have been sufficient to alleviate poverty, but modern systems may not be any better equipped ethically or practically. A thorough grounding in how religion ad-

dressed poverty in the past, even how it defined the poor, is indispensable for an understanding of how modern cultures attempt to deal with the same problem, and of what, if any, concessions, these secular cultures should make to poverty's continued existence.

In the first chapter, Peregrine Horden introduces a comparative and diachronic approach to the study of poverty and charity. He opens a window on the complexities of hospital development in the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic worlds, suggestively pointing to new research questions for scholars of this institution in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. He addresses the question, "What difference did hospitals make?" Defining *hospital* in minimal terms as an institution for the overnight relief of the poor and sick, but not necessarily a medical establishment, Horden focuses mainly on the emergence of hospitals in the early Byzantine world. He places Byzantium's hospitals in context by drawing comparisons with those in early medieval Islam and Western Europe, and by looking for more obscure beginnings in the Jewish tradition, in an attempt to elucidate the relationship between ideology and practice in their founding. Is the hospital a gradual evolution from antecedents in Jewish or Christian charity or in the pagan world of medicine and healing? Or is it, as some of its ideologues and several of its modern historians suggest, a relatively sudden development of precise, local circumstances? On either account, what difference did hospitals make to the lives of the poor?

Horden begins by rehearsing Peter Brown's recent implicit answer in *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover, 2002) that hospitals in antiquity were part of a revolution in urban leadership. They both symbolized and helped to bring about the demise of the ancient citizen-based model of civic society. Thereafter, the bishop became "nourisher of the poor." Horden also characterizes hospitals as signifying a reconfiguration of urban space; they separated and emphasized the poor, not unlike the roughly contemporary cemeteries designated for them.

When did hospitals first make their impact? Horden attempts to go beyond previous accounts by providing chronologically and geographically precise answers. Christian hospitals seem to have emerged in the middle of the fourth century. They spread from province to capital (Constantinople) and thence around the Mediterranean, to Italy and North Africa. But hospitals were slow to ar-

rive in Gaul and Spain and even slower to establish in Islamic lands. From a world-historical perspective, hospitals were hardly inevitable creations; they required particular social and economic circumstances. Before Christianity, Horden argues, and outside Buddhist traditions, only the Romans had founded hospitals, though only for a brief period, and only for the “repair” of soldiers and slaves. No trace of Jewish hospitals before the mid-fourth century (when the first Christian ones appeared) is evident—with one explicable exception.

To Horden, the existence of Jewish hospitals points to an important distinction between ideology and practice in history. Apologists conferred a rhetorical or symbolic emphasis on Christian hospitals that was out of all proportion to their number and capacity. Jewish hospitals, however, when they arrived a little later in the early Middle Ages, had no such ideological grounding, partly explaining why their history is so elusive. Horden maintains that establishments that performed hospital functions without attracting ideological attention (sub-hospitals as he calls them) were the precursors to Christian hospitals. By filling some of the gaps in Christian hospital history, they allow the hospital to be an evolution as well as an invention.

Horden’s is a multifaceted and wide-ranging account of hospitals that admits no simple conclusion regarding their significance. As part of the mixed economy of care in the early Middle Ages, in which charity and self-help variously combined, hospitals might have had considerable ideological and economical impact. But neither their geographical spread nor their medical importance permit a simple evaluation. Hospitals remain perplexing, complex institutions with an uncertain history.

Whereas Horden takes the long and crosscultural view, with attention to Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, Michael Bonner focuses the spotlight solely on the earliest period of Islam, though not without comparative results. He shows that ideas of poverty in the Qur’an are much more complex and interesting than usually thought. He examines the underlying principles of “Qur’anic economics” by considering poverty and the poor in the Qur’an with as little interference as possible from extra-Qur’anic narratives about Muhammad and the earliest Muslim community in Arabia. Rather than dwelling on the well-known distinction between voluntary and involuntary alms, *sadaqa* and *zakat*, he begins with

the notions of “purification” and “return.” *Purification*—the root meaning of *zakat*—appears in many contexts. Feeding the poor allows believers to expiate sin, and giving up a portion of their wealth in alms allows them to keep the rest of that wealth intact. *Return* is at the heart of the distinctive Qur’anic idea that the circulation of wealth must not take place only among the rich. The Qur’an, Bonner argues, refers to many kinds of benefaction beyond almsgiving, prominent among which is the division of spoils of war. Lists of beneficiaries include persons known, unknown, and ambiguous cases in between (the so-called *masakin*), and gifts to all of them must be free and unstinting—in the manner of God’s divine grace, *fadh*. In contrast with the medieval, and especially early modern Christian, world, little in Bonner’s account answers to a distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor.

Unlike much of later Islamic tradition and law, the Qur’an sets no limits to the amount of a donation. It speaks of the community of believers as “those upon whose wealth there is a recognized right (*haqq ma’lum*) for the beggar and the deprived.” The right/claim (*haqq*), which inheres in the object of surplus given away, has a close connection with a pre-Islamic Arabian notion. In place of the old Arabian cycle of recurring, crippling obligation (*nawa’ib al-haqq*), however, the Qur’an substitutes a virtuous cycle—or more accurately, return—of generosity and solidarity. Thus did the Qur’an, even though it was not the only source of norms for nascent Islam, provide a distinctive conceptual structure for action and reflection in the “economic sphere.” In a comparative vein, Bonner points to certain similarities with other religions, such as sometimes reading the term, *fuqara’* as “shamefaced poor,” recalling a later Christian tradition.

Mark Cohen’s painstaking paleographical decipherment of torn and effaced medieval letters of the poor, alms lists, and donor records buried for centuries in the Cairo Geniza illuminates a much-lamented dark space in sources about the poor in antique and medieval Judaism, as well as in medieval Islam and Christendom. Not surprisingly, deficiencies in food, clothing, and shelter were the hallmark of poverty in the Jewish community, where bread occupies center stage in the alms lists and in requests from the poor for private assistance. Bread and wheat were the only food items distributed to the chronically poor in the regular com-

munal dole. As Cohen shows, this priority compares favorably with one well-studied Christian city of the fourteenth century—Girona, in Catalonia.

Because letters written by the poor are exceedingly rare for the Middle Ages, the Geniza correspondence is of considerable comparative value for other societies. The chance preservation of a few hundred paupers' letters from Britain during the period of the early Industrial Revolution reinforces the worth of the Geniza documents from medieval Egypt, indicating how a comparative and diachronic study of poverty and charity can bear fruit. Jews in eleventh-century Egypt and Christians in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England complained regularly, and similarly, about their hunger and lack of bread.

The diet of the poor can be assessed with some precision in the Geniza world. Sabra's estimate of two loaves as the daily minimum bread consumption of a poor person in Muslim Cairo during the Mamluk period or as the two-pound daily minimum per person in sixteenth-century Christian Geneva reveals that the weekly ration of four loaves per adult from public (communal) Jewish charity was too little by contemporary standards.¹ That it was insufficient nutritionally as well is evident from the weight and type of loaf, which are on record. Cash subsidies also helped the poor to purchase other foods, including vegetables and victuals like cheese and fish (rarely meat) containing protein.

Hunger was not always assuaged by food donations, whether through public or private means. The rhetoric sometimes seems formulaic, but the cries of hunger in letters of appeal are genuine. They have their parallel in other societies. The motif of the large (and starving) family seems to be a structural element in the rhetoric of poverty across time and culture.

Clothing constituted another option for Jewish charity in the Geniza world. The written complaints of inadequate clothing dovetail with the plethora of data from clothing-distribution lists.

The Geniza letters of appeal are not to be construed as begging. Begging, defined in rabbinical Judaism as door-to-door solicitation, was frowned upon. In the Geniza, petitioners sought assistance from would-be or former patrons, by employing the

1 Adam Sabra, *Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam: Mamluk Egypt, 1250–1517* (New York, 2000).

form of the Arabic petition. Most of the petitioners were members of the “working poor,” or even people formerly well-to-do who had temporarily fallen into poverty as a result of some setback. As Brown suggested in *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, people in Late Antiquity, like those who solicited charity in the ancient Near East, were more like plaintiffs than beggars. This same modus operandi is evident in the Judaeo-Arabic petitions of the poor from the Cairo Geniza during later periods.

As Judah Galinsky shows, an in-depth study of the Jewish *responsa* literature contributes significantly toward understanding the charitable practices of the Jews living in thirteenth-century Christian Spain, relative to those in Christian society. The custom of charitable bequests prior to death is a case in point. Study of the *responsa* reveals that Jews commonly made bequests for charitable causes—for instance, the synagogue, the study hall, and especially the poor and the orphaned. Wealthy Jews tended to favor the private charitable foundation, or *Hekdesh*, which generally functioned independently of the communal framework. Handpicked executors were responsible for investing the capital and distributing the income on an annual basis in perpetuity.

A comparative perspective yields new insights into Christian and Islamic influences on Jewish charity. The widespread practice of charitable bequests among the Jews of Spain seems to be related to parallel developments in the contemporary Christian community, namely, the rise of lay piety. The terminology of Jews in their bequests before death—“for the sake of my soul” or “for the benefit of my soul”—found not only in Jewish Latin wills but also in the Hebrew *responsa*, is similar to the “*pro anima*” bequests in Christian wills. The *Hekdesh* was actually patterned after the Islamic *waqf* or *hubs*. The cultural identity of the Jews in Spain, as influenced by both Christians and Muslims, is well expressed in their charitable practices prior to death.

Comparative questions reveal what is unique about Judaism, too. For example, charitable bequests by Jews in Spain were not linked to the saying of prayers or to other rituals on behalf of the donor. In the absence of a Jewish clerical class devoted to the reciting of prayers—which contrasts with Catholic practice—perpetual commemoration and intercession for the soul’s sake through prayer was not an option. Jews in medieval Spain preparing for the world to come, unlike their Christian neighbors, did

not have many choices other than contributing to the building and upkeep of synagogues, the subsidization of Torah study, the redemption of captives, and care for the poor, sick, and orphaned.

Jews' charitable bequests were vouchsafed by the Talmud, as a way to save souls from the judgment of hell. In this context, not only could the Hekdesh trust safeguard, to a certain extent, a donation from misuse by the communal bureaucrats; it could also grant a donor concrete commemoration and a favorable spiritual legacy. When a Jew in thirteenth-century Spain wrote in his Hebrew will that his donation was "for the benefit of [his] soul," he may have been echoing the "pro anima mea" clause contained in contemporary Christian wills, though he had ancient Jewish precedent for the notion as well.

Moving from late medieval Spain to the early modern period, Brian Pullan returns the focus again to Christendom, this time to the much-debated issue of the role played by Catholic thinkers in the changes that began to sweep across Christian Europe during the sixteenth century. His essay offers a prime illustration of the value of the comparative method as applied to the Christian case. He points out that most of the principles that governed poor relief in Western Europe between the sixteenth and nineteenth century emanated mainly from cities between 1520 and 1560—that is, during the religious revolutions of the sixteenth century. To what extent were these measures inspired by Protestant theology? Did they mark a rejection of medieval Catholic theories and practices in favor of a more rational and worldly approach to social problems?

Traditionally, Catholic poor relief was shaped by the overlapping but distinct concepts of "charity" and "mercy." "Charity" could exist between equals (neighbors, friends, and family), and "mercy" entailed transactions between the strong and the weak, the prosperous and the poor, etc. The evidence of mercy provided a soul's defense at the Last Judgment; to neglect them was to court damnation. The rules of many Catholic institutions, including confraternities, were designed to ensure that Christians performed good deeds systematically. Many theologians validated good deeds even to the benefit of unworthy persons, regardless of any undesirable social consequences. Critics have argued that these Catholic doctrines encouraged dependence, palliated poverty, and probably fostered a class of professional beggars who traded on the belief that almsgiving was vital to salvation.

After 1520, many European cities attempted to suppress begging and wandering and to introduce methods for assisting those of the poor who could prove their willingness to work. Some evidence suggests that Protestant reformers were responsible for these changes, probably associated, at least in part, with their assault on Catholic doctrines concerning meritorious good works, purgatory, pilgrimages, images, the decoration of churches, and the special virtues of a life of poverty and humility. Nonetheless, notwithstanding Protestant initiative, Catholic cities introduced similar measures against vagrancy and indiscriminate almsgiving within a few years—needless to say, without subscribing to a general demolition of Catholic theology and institutions. Catholic theologians and canon lawyers, however, were not inclined to regard all of the poor as the representatives of Christ; their “order of charity” distinguished between the worthy and unworthy. Moreover, long before the sixteenth-century attempts to set up central almonries and institutionalize outdoor relief, French, Spanish, and Italian cities had set out to rationalize hospitality and to concentrate large numbers of small foundations into more efficient, centralized public hospitals. Hence, Catholics and Protestants may not have differed fundamentally, either in theory or practice, in the matter of poor relief. Most towns reacted in a broadly similar fashion to economic crises or outbreaks of disease, practical considerations overriding doctrinal differences.

Pullan’s comparative method reveals an aspect hitherto unnoticed in the vast literature on Catholic and Protestant poor reforms. Catholic societies retained and expanded certain kinds of institution that were alien to most Protestant communities: hospitals for abandoned children; pawn banks, which lent money to the needy at moderate interest rates; and convent-like institutions for women whose honor was threatened or lost. Behind them, arguably, lie variations on the principle of tolerating a lesser evil to avoid a greater one. Protestant poor relief was an instrument for creating a disciplined society in which overt sinfulness was repressed, even though all human beings remained sinners. Catholic poor relief was more willing to accommodate sin and bring it to the surface—the better to counter it through conversion and penance—within the processes of redemptive charity.

Marjorie McIntosh’s contribution shows how the Protestant town of Hadleigh, Suffolk, handled poor relief during the sixteenth century. Using statistical data from records of the Town

Book, weekly receipts of the Collectors of the Poor, and the parish registers of baptisms, marriages, and deaths, McIntosh describes a complex network of charity and coercion. Town-supported assistance derived from publicly owned land and obligatory poor taxes levied on the wealthier local residents.

During the first half of the sixteenth century, as poverty mounted and private charity proved inadequate, many English towns experimented with methods of helping those poor people deemed qualified for aid. But as urban leaders moved into forms of tax-based support, they immediately encountered the high cost of relief, leading to greater restrictions on recipients. The Elizabethan Poor Law of 1598, modified slightly in 1601, codified and extended the best practices that had emerged during the past two generations within particular urban settings. The statutes required that every parish provide basic food, shelter, and clothing for its legitimately needy residents, financed by compulsory taxation of the more well-to-do. The Poor Laws also specified the forms of punishment that were to be used against the idle or vagrant poor. These laws confined poor relief to local communities; the details about who was to receive it and how it was to be administered were left entirely in the hands of individual parish officials. When viewed in this light, England's vaunted distinction as the first European country to make welfare a matter of national policy—often touted as one the factors that led to England's early industrialization and its movement toward imperialism—looks less ambitious and less noble.

Particularly fascinating is McIntosh's anecdotal material, which is reminiscent of the data in the Jewish Geniza documents, demonstrating again the value of a comparative and diachronic approach. Some of the poor were assisted in their own homes, through the provision of money, clothing, fuel, or nursing care; thirty-six elderly people were given free housing plus a weekly stipend in the town's almshouses. Orphaned children and those from large and troubled families were boarded with other people. McIntosh's analysis also has methodological importance; the detail of Hadleigh's poor-relief records makes possible a more precise examination of who was being assisted and in what ways than has been provided for any other European community of this period or earlier.

Unlike most Judaic and Islamic communities, at least until the

nineteenth century, Hadleigh coupled multiple forms of poor relief for worthy residents with coercive policies intended to discipline or expel idle, ill-behaved, or nonresident poor people. Although Parliamentary legislation played an enabling role in this policy, Hadleigh's leaders struggled on their own with two intractable problems: how to reconcile genuine religious and social concern for the poor with the need to maintain order and discipline without incurring unreasonable expenses.

Amy Singer resumes the consideration of poverty in an Islamic context. Like Cohen's essay, hers addresses the subject of feeding the poor, but, in this case, through an investigation of the *imarets*, the large public soup kitchens of the Ottoman Empire. These imarets were largely imperial endowments, often founded as part of a complex of public buildings, like mosques, colleges, baths, etc. Through a textual study of the constitution of these endowed institutions, with particular attention to archaeology and architecture, Singer examines the lists of people qualified to be fed in various imarets throughout the empire. She discovers that the line between need and privilege was neither clear nor necessarily relevant in assigning rights to eat at a public kitchen. As with many forms of charity, the imarets served not only to deliver assistance but also to reinforce existing hierarchies of the social order, marking status through the idiom of food. The motivations of Ottoman sultans to build imarets were as manifold as those behind Christian charitable institutions. They emerged in a culture that stressed the personal obligation to charity and long-standing traditions of hospitality, as well as more mundane political and social aims of imperial rulers.

This research on imarets is part of a new phase in the study of Muslim endowments. A recent monograph by Singer about the Hasseki Sultan soup kitchen in Jerusalem demonstrates how the accounting registers of endowments can supplement the more normative endowment decrees to gain a dynamic understanding of the functioning of charity.² Singer's chapter in this collection draws from the wealth of evidence available about imarets in the documentation of Ottoman imperial policies. In addition to the written record, many of the buildings still function as public kitchen-

2 Singer, *Constructing Ottoman Beneficence: An Imperial Soup Kitchen in Jerusalem* (Albany, 2002).

ens in Turkey, standing as archaeological and architectural testaments to their history.

Much of the historiography of charity to date focuses on institutions. In this respect, the imarets are ideal candidates for study in comparative history. As observed in Cohen's essay, and demonstrated in this one as well, food, shelter and clothing are the universal elements of charitable distribution. Societies and eras differ, however, in the modes of their distribution. The imarets represented one component of the Ottoman effort to supply social and spiritual services to urban populations. Although the construction of large kitchens to feed many people on a daily basis appears to be particular to the Ottomans, it finds cognates throughout the world.

Addressing the most recent period discussed in this collection, Mine Ener examines archives hitherto unutilized for the history of poverty and charity—nineteenth- and early twentieth-century police records—to explore how rulers in Cairo and Istanbul balanced traditional religious prerogatives of poor relief with budding concerns about population, hygiene, and urban space. She argues that the new state emphasis on cleanliness and sanitation, in combination with rulers' desire to project a positive image, resulted in the creation of new institutions to provide for the poor, as well as new ideas about the role of municipal offices. Her study of police records finds extensive evidence of the poor's receipt of assistance and their interactions with the state. Illustrating once more the fruitfulness of a comparative, diachronic approach to the study of poverty and charity, Ener's documents reveal similarities and differences between poor-relief efforts of the Islamic Middle East and those of Christian Europe. Ener uncovers attitudes and policies that are remarkably familiar to those who study the subject for early modern Europe.

The reasons for new levels of state-initiated poor relief in Cairo and Istanbul partly echo those for centralized poor relief in Christian countries 300 years earlier. In nineteenth-century Egypt, the establishment of state-run shelters went hand-in-hand with concerns about the idle poor and efforts to control migration to the cities like Cairo. Laws against begging reflected an attempt to control the public presence of the poor, but they also fulfilled religious prerogatives. The Cairo police periodically collected the poor, subjecting them to medical examinations at police head-

quarters and determining whether non-residents could claim a beggar's right to remain in Cairo or had to return to their villages of origin. Poor houses were established to keep the poor out of the public eye.

Whereas economic circumstances of early to mid-nineteenth-century Egypt resulted in increased public awareness of the poor in Cairo, centralized formal state intervention into poor relief did not occur until the late nineteenth century in Istanbul. Although city officials restricted unemployed men's access to the city, Istanbul's deserving poor were able to receive care from the city's substantial religious endowments and to procure alms from city residents until late in the century. By the end of the century, however, the growing visibility of the poor, due to migration and warfare, forced Istanbul's municipal government to regulate the public presence of the indigent. Begging prohibitions first arose during the 1880s, but the first government-sponsored poor shelter, *Darülaceze*, did not open its doors until 1896. This shelter—established by the Ottoman sultan but funded partly through public subscriptions—provided food and shelter to the needy while combatting poverty through training projects and educational endeavors. Many of the needy voluntarily sought admittance to this shelter; others entered against their will.

In the concluding essay, Peter Brown asks what prompted people in the post-pagan world to “remember the poor.” Reflecting on the articles presented herein, he finds some common ground among the three religions on this score, drawing attention to what he calls “an aesthetic of society.” Those who tended to serve as advocates for the poor—scholars and clergy—also called attention to themselves as members of society who should not be forgotten, even if their value lay outside the practical mainstream. Brown's essay thus gives additional meaning to a comprehensive, comparative study of poverty and charity in all its aspects.

Taken collectively, these articles on poverty and charity in the three monotheistic faith communities suggest a new research agenda for poverty/charity studies, highlighting interdisciplinary and comparative methodologies. For historians specializing in one of the faith-based groups (the usual case), they provide a rich introduction into how poverty was perceived and charity practiced in societies with which they may be less familiar—from Late An-

tiquity to the modern period. The attention paid herein to Judaism and Islam is particularly important, since most of the historical study of poverty and charity so far has centered in Christendom. The larger canvass of similarities and differences among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam within this special issue of the journal can only help to advance further research into all three religions.

As valuable as the details of the individual studies in this issue are in and of themselves, however, the collection as a whole is also significant for its glimpse into the abiding “structure” of poverty and charity, bringing their dyadic relationship into greater relief across times and places. This examination of an era in which religious interests largely determined the boundaries of poverty and charity raises some definitive questions, even if it cannot claim to have all of the definitive answers. At stake in further study is precisely a fuller picture of Brown’s “aesthetic of society.”