

# Poverty, the Poor and Welfare in Medieval Urban Culture

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Dieser Beitrag behandelt die Frage nach der Bedeutung von Armut und Armenfürsorge in der städtischen Kultur des Mittelalters. Grundlage jeglichen Armutsdiskurses stellte im Mittelalter die Bibelexegese dar, die in der Nachahmung des Lebens Christi ein theologisches Ideal des Lebens im Diesseits entworfen hatte. Im Verzicht auf materiellen Besitz, also in freiwilliger Armut lag ein Stück Heilsversprechen begründet, das sich im spirituellen Reichtum der Besitzlosigkeit bereits andeutete. Obwohl diese Theologie der Armut grundsätzlich für das gesamte Mittelalter Gültigkeit beanspruchte, veränderte sich die Haltung der Kirche im Armutsdiskurs zwischen dem 5. und dem 15. Jahrhundert fundamental. Einen letzten Höhepunkt erlebte die Armutsdebatte im 13. Jahrhundert, als die Franziskanerobservanz das Dogma der vollständigen Armut Christi nochmals vehement vertrat, während die römische Kurie unter Johannes XXII. diese Haltung unter Androhung der Exkommunikation als Irrlehre bezeichnete. Letztere Position hatte sich faktisch denn auch längst durchgesetzt; der Besitz, den die Kirche akkumulierte, stand dem Besitz weltlicher Fürsten denn auch in nichts nach, wenn er diesen nicht sogar übertraf.

Armut war jedoch nicht nur eine theologische Frage, sondern zugleich auch eine drängende soziale Realität. Besonders in den Städten entstanden neue Formen von Armut sowie von Armenfürsorge; diese Entwicklung war zugleich auch Ausdruck eines neuen städtischen Selbstbewusstseins, das sich dem Problem der Armut in anderer Weise annahm, als es in der monastischen Kultur der Fall gewesen war. Damit verlagerte sich der Armutsdiskurs sowie die Armenfürsorge selbst aus dem geistlichen Bereich in den Bereich weltlicher Kontrolle. Armenhäuser und Armenfürsorge wurde nicht mehr von Klerikern geführt, sondern von dem städtischen Rat Rechenschaft schuldigen Korporationen oder gar von städtischen Beamten. Dieser Wandel war tiefgreifend, weil er von einem Prozess der Bürokratisierung und Verschriftlichung begleitet war, dem wir nicht zuletzt zahlreiche Quellen und somit unser Wissen über die Organisationsstruktur der Armenfürsorge in mittelalterlichen Städten verdanken.

Als soziale Gruppe lassen sich die Armen in den mittelalterlichen Städten ziemlich genau ausmachen. Städtische Gesetzgebung und Verordnungen wiesen ihnen genau definierte Orte, Verhaltensweisen, Rechte, Pflichten und Funktionen zu. Dabei wurde Armut als Signum von Randständigkeit verstanden, und als arm erachtete Menschen sozial marginalisiert, auf der anderen Seite wurde diese Randständigkeit jedoch als fundamentale Bedrohung jeglicher sozialen Ordnung verstanden, der man letztlich nur dadurch beikommen konnte, indem man sie kontrollierte. Mittelalterliche Armenfürsorge und die entsprechenden Institutionen, so könnte man mit Michel Foucault argumentieren, dienten also einerseits der Linderung der alltäglichen Sorgen der Armen, andererseits bedeuteten sie aber auch gesellschaftliche Kontrolle sozialer Randgruppen, welche die gesellschaftliche Ordnung im Prinzip stets bedrohten. Ohne vollständig mit Foucault übereinzustimmen, und obwohl er seine These im Hinblick auf den frühmodernen Staat entwickelt hat, bereichert seine Argumentation auch die Analyse mittelalterlicher Armutsforschung.

Die städtische Kultur des Mittelalters verfügte neben den Mechanismen von Überwachen und Strafen aber auch über ein weiteres Instrument der Sozialkontrolle, die zugleich auch noch einen Mehrwert

generierte. In der rituellen Integration und der gleichzeitigen Demütigung sozial marginalisierter Gruppen bestätigte sich die herrschende Ordnung in öffentlichen Inszenierungen. Auch die Errichtung grosser Repräsentationsbauten zugunsten sozial minder Privilegierter erfüllten ganz ähnliche Funktionen. Der hierbei erzeugte symbolische Mehrwert wurde jedoch nicht gleichmässig an alle partizipierenden Gruppen verteilt, sondern alleine von den Eliten zu ihrer eigenen Etablierung abgeschöpft. In diesem Licht erscheinen Armutsfürsorge mittelalterlicher Städte nur beschränkt als wirkliche Formen von Wohltätigkeit, denn der eigentliche Gewinn kam nicht den Armen zugute, sondern diente der Konsolidierung der bestehenden Herrschaftsordnung. Nicht zuletzt erklärt sich eine solche scheinbar zynische Haltung aus einem vormodernen Verständnis der sozialen Rolle von Armen. Gleichermassen wie jedes andere Menschenschicksal war auch die Armut ein Teil der göttlichen Voraussicht und hatte somit im Heilsplan seine Funktion. Das Ideal einer Gesellschaft, in der niemand arm ist, in der niemand Not litt, existierte in dieser Welt nicht; diese Vorstellung war für die Menschen des Mittelalters eine Vision für das Leben im Jenseits, auf das sie sich alle vorbereiteten.

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## INTRODUCTION

Influenced by sociology, the study of social groups has formed an important focus of historical investigation. For almost forty years now historians studying different epochs have examined societies from the perspective of their social stratifications. The sociological paradigm refined the vocabulary of historians by making available terms and concepts that helped to understand the process of social stratification (*Sozialgeschichte*). The process of social stratification is different from one epoch to another. As a result of the methodological change of paradigm, interest shifted from the study of the rich and powerful who lead societies economically and politically to the lower classes, to groups and individual at the edge of societies. For historians of western societies of the 19th century the interest shifted from the bourgeoisie to the emergence of a proletariat as a consequence of industrialisation, whereas historians of ancient societies showed particular interest in slaves and no longer exclusively in slave-owners.

Moreover, the question of the social stratification of groups and individuals is closely connected to the question of their economic position within in a society. That there exists a relation between social rank and economic conditions is one of the paradigmatic methodological implications of social history in general. The group we wish to analyse in this chapter is therefore described better as a socio-economic group than a social class in the

strict sense. The sociological approach, however, is very much present through the fact that we describe certain individuals as representatives of a group, and by the very fact that we utilise 'the Poor' as a category of scientific analysis.

## DEFINITION

Today we would define poverty in a very broad sense as the shortage of necessary means of subsistence. This phenomena is historically universal; we can find it in all epochs and in all parts of the world. A closer look at opinions on poverty and the poor in medieval societies, however, clarifies how closely connected even such a supposed universal and unalterable phenomenon is to its immediate historical context. The definition of poverty (*pau-pertas*) given by the great 13th century scholastic thinker and author, Thomas Aquinas, is quite surprising for our contemporary understanding. He declared: "Poor is he who makes his living from the rewards of his labour". Following this definition the poor include peasants, journeyman and artisans as well as merchants. Already in the times of Thomas Aquinas, these people did not form a single group: some of them – mainly the merchants – were not and were not regarded as poor at all. The perspective applied by Thomas emerged from its own social embedding in a ecclesiastical context of the mendicant order, the Dominicans.

Having said this, we must acknowledge that the significance of defining a historical phenomenon such as poverty is rather limited and must always be considered in its immediate historical context. We therefore hardly bring the topic closer to an understanding by listing the supposedly permanent characteristics of poverty or of the poor. The history of poverty in a specific moment of History is the history of its perception, of its social, economic, political and religious meaning. The history of poverty and welfare in general is the history of its changes.

## CHRISTIAN-THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF POVERTY AND WELFARE

As the example of Thomas Aquinas indicates, Christianity is always to be considered as one of the general frameworks of understanding of medieval societies. Whatever we are discussing in medieval history we need to think about Christian religion and theology as one of the centres of meaning and understanding. This is the case for the history of poverty as well.

Compared to earlier times, the New Testament leads to a new understanding of poverty. This shift altered the meaning of poverty from philosophy to theology. Whereas in ancient pagan culture giving up one's property was interpreted as a means of achieving the ideal of an ascetic way of living, Christianity added a completely new dimension to the phenomenon. According to Matthew 19:21 the renunciation of property was a condition for the ideal religious way of living. "Jesus said to him, If you wish to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give them to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven; then follow me". Moreover, in Christianity an eschatological meaning was assigned to the voluntary renunciation of property and of consumption of material goods: "And every man who leaves houses and brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or

fields, for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life. But many who are first shall be last, and the last first". The example of St. Francis, one of the most popular saints of the latter Middle Ages is very clear. Born as the son of a rich merchant in central Italy, he rejected his father's goods and preferred a life in material poverty; the symbolical gesture of taking off his fine clothes is symptomatic of a society where material goods have, for certain social groups, already become part of everyday life. The material poverty chosen by St. Francis, however, was richly compensated by spiritual wealth. The voluntarily poor were promised eternal life. This thought was enforced by the exegesis of the Fathers of the Church, namely St. Augustin and St. Hieronymus. In their doctrine they theologially legitimised poverty as the most excellent form of a Christian way of living. The example to follow, of course, was the life of Christ who always renounced all material goods and who lived from the alms he received from his followers and other merciful people.

The most important religious institution of the Middle Ages, the Holy Church (*Sancta Romana Ecclesia*) based its attitude towards poverty and the poor on the Bible as well. From its very beginning the welfare for the poor was regarded as one of the Church's most important activities in this world. In Matthew 25:35-36 we find the following paragraph that served as an ideal instruction for the institution's conduct: "For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in; I was naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me". The importance that was assigned to religious virtues like brotherly love (*caritas*) or compassion (*compassio*) supported the care for the needy and simultaneously amplified the meaning and power of exactly these virtues.

The result of the religious meaning of poverty and welfare is illustrated best by the monastic movement which in substance had two related variants. On one hand, there were orders whose interest was the retreat from the secular world; they gathered in congregations that fled from the rest of society, building monasteries in remote areas where nobody would disturb their prayers and their meditations. On the other hand, there were orders that concentrated their common activities, beyond the inner life of the congregations, on giving assistance to foreigners, namely pilgrims. The name of the order of the Hospitalers founded at the end of the 11th century for instance referred to their activity in offering shelter to pilgrims and travellers.

These theologially based concepts, that the rejection of material goods expressed a religious attitude towards the life and the world and that caring for the poor showed mercy towards them, persisted theoretically throughout the Middle Ages.

Although this theologial setting continued to claim validity, the Church's attitude towards the issue of property and possession underwent a considerable change during the 1000 years that we call the Middle Ages. Moreover, the religious ideal of voluntary poverty did not correspond entirely with the realities of poverty. By far most of the poor in the Middle Ages were involuntarily poor: they simply had no choice. The medieval Church, however, did not approve all forms of poverty as being willed by God and as expressing an ideal way to conduct one's life. Recurrently we can observe the issue in theologial debates. Movements like the Catars, the Valdesians or the Umiliati focused on retreat from the secular world and on the renunciation of property; nevertheless they

were declared heretics and excommunicated by the Roman Church – among other reasons – for their excessive rejection of property and of the consumption of material goods. Political interests also greatly influenced the Church's attitude towards different religious movements.

The famous case of St. Francis [Plate 6] illustrates the link between the issue of poverty and political interests of the Mother Church in Rome. In the oral certificate of the order that was approved by Innocence III in 1209/1210 the radical rejection of property as the imitation of the life of Christ was only accepted in conjunction with and in exchange for unconditional submission to the papacy. The pope had a strong interest in participating in the new movement's enormous success; the mendicant orders had an remarkable drawing force, particularly in the highly urbanised regions of central Italy and the papacy was especially keen to integrate the recent movement of the Franciscans. Furthermore, the approval of the mendicant orders and therefore the integration of their leaders within the high ranks of the Roman Church led to a weakening of the originally radical attitude towards material goods as exemplified St. Francis. A glance at the very centre of the Franciscan order, its Mother Church in Assisi, makes clear how relative the rejections of property and wealth had become in Franciscan ideology already a hundred years later. The building itself already is an accumulation of material goods in the literal sense of the word, for two churches were erected one upon the other. Moreover, the decoration was executed by the most famous artist of the time, Giotto, and his workshop [Plate 7]. The decoration particularly of the upper Church in Assisi is extremely rich and strikes the viewers for its abundance and wealth up to our days.

Only twenty years after the approval of the Franciscan order can we observe the final end of the debate on whether the Church should be allowed to own worldly goods or whether it should follow Christ's example and conduct a life in perfect poverty. Pope John XXII rejected the opinion of the complete poverty of Christ and established the definitive doctrine of property of the Church. Therewith he provoked intense reactions on behalf of the Franciscan Observance which is associated with the famous William of Ockham; the result, however, was irreversible. The Church did preach material poverty as an ideal for individual conduct of life, as a ideal attitude that supported merciful gestures and therewith amplified the proclamation of the catalogue of Christian virtues but did not itself not live it unreservedly, especially as an institution.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF WELFARE INSTITUTIONS IN MEDIEVAL CITIES**

Poverty and welfare were not only issues discussed by theologians; they also were practical problems, particularly where many people were living together, that is, in the cities more than anywhere else. But here the perspective underwent a fundamental change. The renaissance of urban culture, the economic growth of the cities and the political autonomy they gradually gained led to a different attitude towards the problem of poverty and welfare. In urban societies poverty and welfare came to have a different meaning than in monastic culture, for peasant society or in the discussions of theologians.

A close look at the organisation of a particular medieval urban hospital may clarify how the issue of poverty changed completely when it was no longer understood exclusively as a

theological debate but rather as a practical problem to be solved. Questions that did not concern theologians arose and were answered in a certain way; questions like: How was such a structure to be endowed? How run? And by whom?

The case of Basel (today a city in Switzerland, then an aspiring city-state within the Empire) may serve as an example. In the middle of the 13th century a new hospital was founded. Although the bishop of Basel, as the emperor's vassal, was the nominal lord of the city, the foundation of the new institution was the responsibility of the city council. Corresponding to the growing political significance of the council, the foundation offered the possibility of counterbalancing clerical welfare institutions; in a sense the city's direct involvement in the welfare sector also meant competing with the bishop and the clergy for control over city government. The new hospital expressed the political will of the council to contribute to the city's welfare. This is also reflected in the organisational structure of the hospital. Up to the last third of the 14th century the most important managers of the hospital were clerics. At the head, there was a Master of the hospital supported by a few curators and a procurator who was the hospital's legal representative; besides, there was a brotherhood whose members cared for the inmates and conducted economic affairs. But around 1400 the brotherhood dissolved; most probably it was no longer compatible with the ongoing secularisation of the hospital's management. From now on, the great council elected the master and the procurators of the hospital; the officeholders were accountable to the city council. Thus, the management of the hospital was integrated into the city's administration and therefore became a possible step in the career ladder of public offices. In other words, from the clerical sphere of influence and therefore from a religious ideal the hospital shifted into a socio-political sphere controlled by the communal authorities.

After the dissolution of the brotherhood care and support of the inmates passed over to paid female personnel. This created some problems and in 1432 citizens informed the council that the care in the Strasbourg hospital was much better because it was provided by a brotherhood whose members were worked as volunteers, and received several types of privileges. As a consequence, the Basel city council tried to re-establish such a brotherhood; the lack of success of this plan can be explained by the fact that the council did not provide the necessary money.

As to the medical treatment in such institutions we unfortunately know very little. For Basel we have no evidence that there was a medical staff or something similar; the people who treated the inmates seem to have been paid by hours and did not belong to the hospital's staff. This, of course, has to do with medieval ideas of medicine and medical theories. In the Middle Ages people believed that all corporal fluids were not clean; therefore, unlike today, doctors to an extent, but especially surgeons and dentists, were not regarded as members of honourable professions; they formed one category with executioners and prostitutes, in short everybody who came into contact with corporal fluids was regarded as dishonest.

A medieval hospital, however, was a place where inmates were cared for not only through worldly gifts and medical treatment but also by spiritual support. Hence, already in the year 1300 we can document the existence of a priest belonging to the hospital and its chapel. The number of spiritual supporters for the patients grew continuously through the 14th

century. Since the beginning of this century, when the whole administration of the hospital had been shifted from clerical to secular influence, the priests and chaplains were appointed by the city council; on the other hand, it was the council who paid – at least in part – the clerics if they fulfilled their duty.

In the same way that the categories of ‘poverty’ and ‘poor’ are not sociological in the strict sense of the word but rather socio-economic, institutions such as hospitals were not only places of medical and spiritual care but also important factors in the economy. The case of Basel shows very well how the economic circumstances of a society were also reflected in institutions like urban hospitals. In a society whose most important economic branch was landed property, such property was also the economic basis of almost any hospital. In Basel the hospital owned houses and furthermore received ‘pensions’ on houses, mainly in the city. From its property in the countryside it received payments of its tithe in the form of grain or wine. Besides these two sources of income, the hospital owned land in the city’s surroundings where it employed workers and peasants to have the land cultivated. The products served for the hospital’s own needs as well as for sale on the local market.

The hospital’s landed property grew continuously since its foundation. However, the hospital did in principle not buy any real estate; almost all the landed property in the hospital’s hands were posthumous donations made in favour of the inmates. Innumerable documents of various kinds confirm this. So-called pious donations were a part of medieval culture. Mainly in testaments people tried to diminish their earthly sins by making redemption payments. They hoped that leaving an inheritance to a pious institution would contribute to their absolution and therefore to eternal life.

Hospitals profited not only from individual donations but also from political circumstances. In Basel two occurrences played a major role in the great expansion of the hospital’s landed property in the first half of the 15th century. First, the dissolution and expulsion of the order of the *Beghinen* (*mulieres devotae* or *religiosae*) between 1405 and 1411. Second, the return of the order of the *Barfüsser* or Uncalced to the Franciscan Observance in 1440. Both events affected the hospital’s real estate directly because – after a short period during which the council conducted the affairs regarding the two orders’ former property – the landed property of both was transmitted to the hospital.

A last point illustrates once again the close connection between political power and welfare in a late medieval urban society. In 1339 the council passed a resolution through which the hospital enjoyed complete tax exemption on landed property. Such a privilege, of course, favoured a policy of continuous growth of landed property and made the hospital one of the most important land owners in the city.

Such wealth and the corresponding financial means required an adequate administration under the control of the city’s council. Integrated in a more general framework of a continuous administrative professionalisation, the hospital’s activity was documented in a detailed accounts. From the mid-15th century onwards the account books are preserved; we can distinguish between books that made notes on expenses, income and taxes. The book where the expenses were written down – first of all – made it possible to have a serious report of the responsible official; not however – as was the case in a monastic context – at the official’s death but at the end of every term of office, that is, every year or even

every six months. The hospital's accountancy not only made its economic activities transparent but also rendered the officials accountable for their activities. The income and the tax books made it possible to check accurately the hospital's debtors, to calculate their back interests and to document their payments. Again, accountancy was used as a transparent instrument of control. With the continuous entries in specified columns half-annual and annual accounts became possible; with others words, double accounting as it has been invented in Venice in the 12th century was a useful tool for conducting an economic institution like a hospital and it became a necessary tool as soon as the hospital had shifted from clerical to secular control.

## **POVERI E DISGRAZIATI. THE POOR AS A SOCIAL GROUP IN MEDIEVAL CITIES**

After the reconstruction of the institutional framework of welfare we shall focus on the social group that was addressed by these institutions: the poor. As mentioned above the categories of poverty and poor are to be understood in their historical context; but still, this paragraph will be an large-meshed generalisation of innumerable variations of a social constellation.

According to different political, social and economic developments, poverty experienced in the context of medieval urban culture shows broad differentiation. But it was only in the cities where new categories of poverty and the poor arose. Moreover this process was accompanied by one paradigmatic change that characterised all kinds of urban poverty and urban welfare in the Middle Ages: poverty came to be regarded as a domestic issue. Care for the poor was not conceived anymore as a service to strangers or pilgrims as was the case for instance with the monastic culture of welfare. In that context the congregation pleased God and followed the order's rules by caring for the needy that came to their monasteries or hospices; the people cared for, however, did not belong to the congregation and there was no intent of integrating them.

Terminology as well as architecture tells us about this difference. One of the classical forms of welfare in monastic culture gave shelter and food to pilgrims; the term for such an institution was *Xenodochium*, a Greek word meaning accommodation for strangers. By consequence the buildings where pilgrims were lodged were generally also separated from the main buildings where the members of the congregations lived. In an urban context, in contrast, the poor were a part of the society – not the most highly regarded part, but still a part of society – and their care was organised within the city walls as long as there was no risk of contagious disease. By consequence the cities promoted the development of welfare institutions as well as their differentiation inside the city's walls.

The emerging cities of the high and late Middle Ages generated new forms of poverty; different political, social and economic structures changed the meaning of the terms poor and poverty and imprinted them up to our days. The promise of the city – expressed best by the proverb: *city air frees* – led huge numbers of the rural population into urban centres. Many of the reasons for poverty are associated with the phenomenon of migration. Sometimes those who arrived in the city could find work but very often there was no labour-force required. And this could happen for different reasons. First, economic structures were highly determined by the regulations of the guilds which limited production and stabilised

prices. Second, medieval urban economies were hall-marked by skilled crafts, services and trade. Therefore, unqualified workers were required only in a small part of urban economic activities, such as for instance building and construction and in less skilled work in different crafts. By consequence many of the immigrants could not find jobs and were forced to make their living with occasional jobs and with begging. “The poor person, wrote the Franciscan Johannes Gerson at the beginning of the 15th century, is the one who – almost starving – shouts: alms for God’s sake! And then he goes on to the streets, to the squares and shouts from door to door”.

But it was not only economic forces that generated neediness. The stream of migration brought people to the cities but their original social networks were left behind. Whereas certain forms of neediness in a household or village could be softened in an extended family or a small community, in the new social context of the city in the first initial phases they were instead amplified.

Another characteristic of urban poverty is its proximity to social fringe groups. The combination of economic need and social isolation led frequently to criminal practices. Already in a 12th-century a chronicle documents this mechanism: “many”, the chronicler says, “who came in such a desperate situation, started to earn their living in contradiction to their origins, became robbers and finished on the gallows”. The quotation is very clear its emphasis that not the individual lack of morality but the context of the city made almost inevitable a negative way of life for the urban poor. But the urban population and the leading groups were quite conscious that poverty and the poor was a fact in urban societies and could not be denied. From the 14th century onwards city councils, therefore, enacted laws defining who was acknowledged as a urban pauper or beggar and could therefore legitimately make demands on the city for his or her subsistence. Foreign beggars were expelled – especially in time of famine [Source].

The differentiation of various groups of poor or needy – widows, orphans, beggars, cripples, homeless, the ill – that took place in the cities of the High Middle Ages led to a corresponding differentiation in the development of welfare institutions. The phenomena of urban poverty was closely connected to the strategies of its regulation by the city’s authorities. However, the definition as well as the institutional regulation of those concerned by such a definition were a tool for integrating individuals and groups in the community. Again, poverty and the poor were in medieval cities regarded as a domestic issue. Where sanitary reasons did not forbid it – as it was the case with plague-houses – welfare institutions were located within the city walls. A closer look at the centre of former medieval cities underlines such a statement. Great welfare institutions like hospitals, orphanages and granaries belonged as much to the image of high and late medieval cities as cathedrals and government palaces did.

At first sight, this looks very much like a concrete realisation of altruistic Christian attitudes. But such an interpretation would misjudge the context of medieval urban culture as well as fail to take into account recent methodological debates about social policy. Integration always meant, at the same time, control. The poor laws underline the intent of controlling or exerting power very clearly. Beggars had to wear a badge that made them recognisable for the authorities. They were given alms and food for their subsistence but they were not allowed to beg in front of the churches when people wanted to go to mass.

By defining poverty and poor the authorities had a tool at hand to control society. We must not think of such a process as a 'conspiracy' but rather as discursive process. Theological, political, social, economic, religious and medical discourses came together to shape the idea of what poverty was and who the poor should be.

The French philosopher Michel Foucault, whose name is associated with structuralism and discourse analysis, described exactly what interests us here. That is, he linked the discourses about poverty, the poor and their social status with the development of welfare institutions and with social policy of the early modern state. Of course, Foucault was concerned mainly with the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries but the foundations of what he described were laid in the Middle Ages; moreover, as a theoretical approach, Foucault's thesis has provided important inspiration for the study of medieval welfare although the context and its conditions vary from those of the early modern state. Foucault described the social policy of the modern state as the 'Great Confinement'. Welfare and its institutions, he argued, were more than anything else a tool to control society, mainly the lower classes and the poor.

By creating their definition of poverty and the poor, the clergy and the secular authorities designated who was meant to be poor and who was to be subjected to particular legislation. In medieval city laws we already find innumerable regulations about where and when beggars, for instance, were allowed and where and when they were welcome – this too was sometimes the case. In other words, discourse about poverty and welfare was a pre-condition for a social policy that decided which social spheres and segments needed to be checked, looked after, cared for or, finally, to be locked up. Foucault saw no structural difference between a prison and an orphanage; he counted the latter among the so-called 'proto-penal institutions'. Foucault's conclusions may be too far-reaching for the context of poverty and welfare in medieval urban culture, but the connection between the different discursive fields of poverty, that is, the social segments where poverty has been debated, discussed and defined and different practices of poor legislation can be described very convincingly as a tool for exerting social control – and they appear to have a general although not exclusive validity for the Middle Ages as well.

The 'Great Confinement', however, was not the only way to integrate the poor in medieval societies. In medieval urban culture especially we can observe other kinds of social contact between different social ranks that generated simultaneous integration and control of the poor. As a visible part of society they were forced to participate in moments of communal representation. Events that helped to form civic identity and that are still known in our days – although often in their re-invented form from the 19th century – were moments in which the poor were consciously made visible for the city's audience.

In Ferrara every year on 23 April, the day of the city's patron St. George, various races through the city were organised. The very prestigious races on horseback were a preferred moment of self-representation for young male patricians; both before and after them, prostitutes, Jews and the city's poor were forced to participate in similar races; but instead of riding on horseback they themselves had to run through the city nearly naked. The winner was decorated with a costly piece of cloth (*palio*). The point, however, was not the competitive confrontation of athletes but rather the consolidation of social order. The col-

lective humiliation of the lower classes and groups on the margins of society contributed to the honour of the city as a whole and confirmed its existing social order and constitution [Plate 8].

Such moments were festive events, and urban elite chose from a wide-ranging offer to put civic self-representation on stage. The famous Palio of Siena which still takes place consolidated the complex organism of the city's unity by a ritual demonstration of the rivalry between the different quarters or *contrade*. In 15th century Florence, the *Calcio* [football] match was a comparable moment in which the authorities confirmed their power. The different parishes joined in a splendid procession on the Piazza Santa Croce where they were awaited by a numerous audience [Plate 10]. Then the ritual started. According to the rules of 1479 the team that scored three times won. Originally, the participants in the *calcio Fiorentino* were the young patricians; we know for instance that Piero de' Medici loved the game. But the *calcio* was not only a showplace for presenting the physical capabilities of the ruling class's sons. Very soon it became also a ritual that demonstrated to the audience the authority's control of any violence that might threaten the social order. For a game in 1489 Lorenzo de' Medici opened the *stinche*, the city's dungeon; the players were chosen among the prisoners from those who associated with poverty, violence and crime. This seemingly strange selection of the players not only led to a increase of violence between the teams during the game, but also was a ritual gesture by the city's most important man and leader. To open the prison, to let violence erupt although in a ritualised form, was an gesture of strength for it referred to the first citizen's power to control even an outburst of violence. Lorenzo proved by this gesture that he could keep violence in the frame of ritual and therefore under control. Naturally enough, after the game the winning team was honoured by Lorenzo and then all the players were sent directly back to the *stinche*. Poverty and violence were a basic threat to all societies, just as they still are. In ritualised form, however, they contributed to the honour and virtue of those societies by symbolically demonstrating that they had been overcome [Plates 11-13].

## **PRO HONORE CIVITATIS. INSTITUTIONS OF WELFARE AS REPRESENTATIONS OF THE REPUBLIC**

The connection between the symbolic integration of the poor and the confirmation of the existing social order is not only found in civic rituals. It also had a theoretical basis. According to medieval political theory, poverty somehow endangered the welfare of the community, the *bonum commune*. Poverty (*paupertas*) was a threat for the city as a social organism (*civitas*). By consequence the poor had to be integrated in society; it was necessary to deal with poverty as a domestic issue and thus to reduce the risk that poverty represented to social order. The political threat to the *civitas* led to new forms of welfare institutions that practised not only care and services for selected poor. Moreover the new institutions documented the grace and solidity of the *civitas* by institutionalising the care for the poor. A closer look at a particular case, an orphanage, will clarify this point.

The Ospedale degli Innocenti in Florence was an orphanage, but in the same measure as it helped the orphans who were brought up in the institution, the majestic building contributed to the city's glory and splendour. This benefit, however, went not to the poor but

to those who had the building made and who financed it. To what extent the new institution was intended to enhance and represent the glory of the city can be observed very clearly in the opening ceremony which was held on January 25, 1445. The ceremony was orchestrated by the Silk Guild, the city's most powerful corporation.

The consuls and leading members of the Arte della Seta assembled in the cathedral, whence, in company of the bishop of Fiesole and the Patriarch of Jerusalem, they went in procession to Piazza SS. Annunziata. The bishop blessed the hospital and celebrated mass and then the Gonfaloniere of Justice (the chief magistrate) accompanied by the priors entered the church and made an offering in the name of the city. Finally, the first member of the new brotherhood which dedicated itself to the care of the orphans was dressed: the Florentine merchant Lapo di Piero Pacini.

This description has all the classic features of a picture of harmony between the secular and the sacred: the Gonfaloniere and the priors represented the State, the bishop and the papal legate represented the Church and the members of the new brotherhood devoted their lives to the pursuit of true Christian charity. But *caritas* should in this case be interpreted in its widest sense to mean the preservation and even the glorification of the *bonum commune*. But not only the charitable but also the monumental building erected to house the orphanage itself contributed to the preservation of the *bonum commune* [Plate 9]. The potentialities for representing the city's virtue were used fully. The most prestigious architect of the time was engaged to design and build the Ospedale: Filippo Brunelleschi. According to contemporary architectural ideals Brunelleschi reformed the whole Piazza SS. Annunziata, had it closed by the huge double-sided Loggia of the Ospedale, decorated with the terracotta *putti* made by the Della Robbia family: a reference to the orphans' state of innocence and therefore to the city's virtue in assuming such a heavy responsibility.

The Florentine example of the Ospedale degli Innocenti clarifies that the discourse about poverty, neediness, criminals and the poor was not the only way to make use of poverty and the poor for building power and consent. Thus, the welfare institutions were not only instruments of integration and control but also of representation; the very buildings themselves were representations of the authorities' legitimate power to assume the responsibility of caring for those regarded as poor. According to medieval political theory, social harmony was promoted through the elimination of conflict at the highest level between secular and sacred powers as well as between the more and less wealthy.

In this process, which we might imagine superficially to be some sort of an early social policy aiming at the redistribution of wealth, we actually observe something quite different. What seems at first sight to be a redistribution of wealth is rather an investment that paid back the investors abundantly. The display of *caritas*, one of the three Christian virtues, was added to the city's stock of symbolic capital. The symbolic surplus that resulted, however, was not redistributed to all social groups and especially not to the poor or needy but skimmed off by and in favour of the ruling class. With this mechanism that combined economic power, Christian virtue and representation, the existing social constellation was confirmed rather than destabilised. Neither the redistribution of wealth nor the political participation of the poor were intended or put into effect. What the members of the council and the Silk Guild gave with one hand they took with the other.

Contrary to our first impression, medieval welfare institutions not only took care for the poor but also contributed very carefully to the preservation of the social order. Although in the Middle Ages we observe institutions, motives and arguments that at first sight seem very similar to modern welfare institutions it would be absolutely misleading to think of them as such. Neither the social, nor the political, nor the economic theories of the Middle Ages intended to create a society in which nobody would be poor. The poor had a social function and they took their place in society. In medieval societies, alongside the other social groups, the poor too were a part of what was ordained by divine providence and therefore a part of the plan for the world's salvation.



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## SOURCE

Ordinance on the poor enacted by the city council of Zürich in 1523

The aforesaid lord Bürgermeister and Council have noted that in the past and even now in the city the common man is particularly and noticeably troubled by foreign beggars, and that there are some persons, in Kraatz [quarter between the cathedral and the lake] as well as in other parts of the city and before the gates,

who gladly provide for these same foreign beggars. They accept money, bread, meat and other things from them [the foreign beggars], in exchange for which, the [the foreign beggars] are lodged, whereby other persons are noticeably wronged. Moreover, some [of the foreign beggars] engage in much crime with pleasure and delight.

Our Lords forbid such corruption, no matter whether it concerns wine, money or some other kind of diversion in Kraatz, or in the guilty party's house in other parts [of the city] or in [other] houses. Whoever provides the diversion shall be fined two marks of silver, and the one who takes part in the diversion shall be fined one mark of silver. No beggar shall go about in the taverns or wine houses or in the churches to wail and beg, but they shall be satisfied with begging in front of the churches and private homes.

Also, no one should sell any dwelling in Kraatz to a beggar or vagabond who is not a citizen, so that the house does not benefit him through rental or, in any way, as a place of diversion.

And no one should do business [with them] which involves money. If someone wants to lodge them, it should be as act of God's will [that is, as an act of charity], and even then for no more than one or two nights, no matter whether within or outside of the [city] gates.

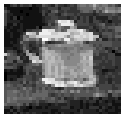
And whoever ignores this command and does not keep it shall be arrested, put in prison and punished according tot the sentence of our Lords.

Resident beggars shall wear a badge so that they can be distinguished from the foreign beggars.

Whoever sends his child out to beg and is discovered as living off of the proceeds in public houses or taverns shall be punished by our Lords.

Whoever ignores these orders shall be fined one pound and ten shillings.

*und Preise*, Basel 1983.



**SEE PLATES 6-13**

So that the above ordinances may be effectively enforced, Stephan Zeller and Andreas

Weber are appointed to the offices of Higher and Lower Beadle for the city gate called

Kätzistürli. Both have shown to uphold these ordinances. In return, our Lords will

stand by, guard and protect them. In this matter be well warned, before any loss is

sustained.