4 WELFARE AND THE CIVIC COMMUNITY

One of the most prominent confraternities of medieval Europe was Orsanmichele in Florence, whose first rules date from 1294. By 1325 it had some 2,000–3,000 members. Orsanmichele was one of a large number of confraternities that emerged in Florence at the time. By the middle of the fifteenth century the city boasted an impressive ninety, about half of which were purely religious; their members were flagellants who flogged themselves to atone for their sins. All confraternities had some sort of religious purpose, even the four that were mainly charitable. Orsanmichele was the largest of these four, taking its name from the Piazza Orsanmichele, the main market for grains, where a statue of the Madonna attracted one of the most important cults of late medieval Florence. In 1336 a new shrine was built for worshippers and in 1348 the confraternity inherited a considerable fortune of 350,000 gold florins. During the 1320s about 85 per cent of the confraternity's revenues, amounting to the equivalent of almost 34,000 daily wages, was spent on the poor. Some of the poor receiving support were living in the countryside controlled by Florence, but the majority were 'respectable poor' from the city itself, including members of the confraternity.[1]

Orsanmichele is a somewhat surprising variant of the thesis outlined by economic historian Peter Lindert, who claims that welfare is essentially a 'free lunch'.[2] That thesis, developed with the help of much more recent data, starts from the observation that, generally speaking, the countries with the highest per capita welfare expenditures also happen to be the richest countries. In the late eighteenth century,

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the most generous countries in terms of welfare expenditure were the Netherlands and Great Britain, also the two wealthiest European nations at the time. Amid constant fears of the poor taking a holiday at the expense of the taxpayer, the fact of the matter seems to be that welfare expenditure in the long run does not hamper economic growth, because its cost is offset by productivity gains.

Although Lindert's data were not available to early modern urban politicians, it is just possible that they had an intuitive understanding of these mechanisms. We catch a glimpse of this in seventeenth-century Amsterdam when it was the only town in Holland to refuse to introduce identity papers for paupers that would allow the authorities to send them back to the place from which they hailed. The Amsterdam authorities worried at times about the potential abuse of their relatively generous welfare system, but in the eyes of the Amsterdam elites the benefits of poor immigrants outweighed their cost.[3] Obviously, they justified their actions with a very different set of arguments, usually inspired by religion, or otherwise by references to the 'common good', but in 1826 they actually said in so many words that 'real harm would ... be caused' if charity were to be withheld from the local poor, or if these were deported to rural colonies for the poor, as the national government proposed at the time. A city like Amsterdam inevitably suffered from seasonal fluctuations in employment and had to look after its workers in the slack season, according to the local authorities. 'Suppose many of [the poor] left the city and settled elsewhere, what effect would this have on the city and on society?'[4]

Even if urban welfare systems underwent periods of serious tension, they proved remarkably robust over time. The reason for this has been suggested by Marco van Leeuwen.[5] He argued that social welfare is not a one-way system of the rich supporting the poor. Rather, Van Leeuwen proposed, it is part of a set of relationships in which the two classes trade favours. The propertied classes worry, for example, about public order, and welfare is one way of 'buying' the compliance of the poor. Or stated in a more positive way: poor relief helps create a sense of community.[6] Moreover, the premodern economy was subject to seasonal patterns and the poor were a significant part of the workforce. To encourage the poor to stay around until the following spring, when the demand for their labour would pick up again, welfare was on offer to help them through the off-season.

If only out of self-interest, urban elites were committed to helping the poor. However, this was made much easier if they could encourage the poor to help themselves, as in the Orsanmichele confraternity. And to a remarkable extent they actually succeeded. An important reason was that 'the poor' were not a separate class in society; many middle-class households had to brace themselves for hard times as well. They had a key role in the developing and sustaining of the welfare system. Social citizenship, in other words, was a key to the maintenance of welfare systems of premodern urban societies. And at the same time, welfare systems created communal bonds that reinforced civic relations.

Welfare Institutions

In the spring of 1788, the city of Hamburg, an important trading hub with some 90,000 inhabitants, introduced a general reform of its welfare institutions by creating a single organisation to look after the impoverished inhabitants. The *Allgemeine Armenanstalt*, or General Poor Relief, would be led by a council that included five members recruited from the ranks of the town council, as well as two representatives of the citizens of Hamburg. The composition of the Relief council was clearly designed to connect welfare to both the political elite and the rate-paying public. The city was divided into five *Armen Bezirke*, or welfare districts, each with two directors. The districts were subdivided into twelve quarters, each with three relief officers, giving the city a total of 180 relief officers, also recruited from among the citizens. They were given the important task to look after the 3,903 poor households registered the previous year in a comprehensive survey of poverty in Hamburg, undertaken by the officers of the civic militias.[7]

This was not the first time that the Hamburg welfare system had been overhauled. A first centralisation had been introduced in the mid-sixteenth century, and subsequently a range of new institutions had been set up during the seventeenth century. In the 1720s the city had tried to reduce the number of beggars and force the poor to accept compulsory work in the textile industry. Nor was this latest attempt at reform out of tune with the rest of the country; similar reforms were introduced all over the German lands at the time: in Berlin in 1774, Lüneburg in 1776, Bremen in 1779, Augsburg in 1782–83, Lübeck in 1784, Hanover in 1785 and, finally, Mainz in 1786. In fact, Hamburg was rather late in joining the ranks of the reformers.

What was unusual was Hamburg's General Poor Relief evaluating its own performance after a decade. In 1799 the Relief council wrote a report on what had been achieved, in which the pre-1788 situation was sketched in bleak terms. Beggars had been a plague on the streets of Hamburg, abusing the citizens' charity at the expense of the 'deserving poor'; destitute children had roamed those same streets, dirty and idle, making mischief. And most importantly no doubt: the poor lacked any incentives to go out and look for work. This the Relief had managed to change, it was claimed. Begging, but also handing out alms, had been strictly prohibited. The poor were visited by the Relief officers on a weekly basis in their own homes. The Relief had set up spinning courses to train the poor, and also several schools to educate pauper children. The number of paupers on benefits had declined by 40 per cent.

While the reform of 1788 appeared at first sight to be a success, major problems were lurking in the background. Children who should have been in school were actually absent on a massive scale. The volume of flax spun by people on benefits was too much for the local industry to handle, and moreover of a poor quality. Productivity was falling, and the wages poor people were receiving for their efforts, inevitably below market rates, were simply not enough to survive on – even if they worked from 4:00 AM till 8:00 PM, and even if the Relief subsidised their rent, clothing and fuel. Worse was to come. Shortly after the report was completed, Hamburg was hit by an unusually severe winter, the overture to several years of economic hardship; then in 1806 the city was occupied by French troops. The General Poor Relief found it impossible to cope with this series of problems.[8] All of this showed, once again, that there was no golden rule for dealing with the issue of poverty. Nevertheless, municipal governments would have to deal with it, one way or another. Many different institutional solutions were combined in the hope of at least keeping poverty manageable.

Our story must start, however, long before the Hamburg welfare reforms of the 1780s. Insofar as cities of the Roman Empire had their institutions for dealing with the various calamities that life dishes out, it is unclear how many of those survived the collapse of the Western Empire, not least because the sources are so thin on the ground.[9] There are indications of the existence of hospitals in several French towns of the sixth century: Arles, for example, where one was established by local bishop St Césaire (503–43), but also Clermont, Le Mans, Rouen,

Amiens, Reims and Metz – all episcopal sees. More hospitals were created during the Carolingian era (eighth–ninth centuries): Orléans, Nevers, Paris, but also in Rome (close to the Parthenon), in Cologne (866) and in Eichstätt (c. 900). Still more were established in German Europe during the tenth century: Augsburg, Bremen and Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen). In Barcelona one hospital is mentioned from this same century, in England no references have been found before the Norman Conquest (1066).[10]

From the twelfth century, and accelerating during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a 'revolution in charity' – the phrase was coined by André Vauchez – swept across Europe.[11] We can follow this process in detail in Toulouse, thanks to an inventory of the local hospitals dating from 1246, when the city had some 25,000–30,000 inhabitants. By the middle of the thirteenth century, Toulouse had twenty-six different hospitals, some located outside the walls. Of these, only five were mentioned for the first time in the 1246 review, and we have no idea if they were recent foundations or had earlier origins. What we do know is that of the remaining twenty-one institutions, one was already mentioned in other sources from the eleventh century; ten more can be reliably dated to the twelfth century. The remaining ten hospitals were mentioned in earlier sources from the thirteenth century.[12]

In England, the much smaller town of Cambridge had a leper hospital that was first mentioned in a document from 1169–72. A second hospital, named after St John the Evangelist, can be found in a document from October 1204. According to later testimony, the latter hospital was built on a 'very poor and empty place belonging to the community of the town of Cambridge'. This charity had been funded by donations from local citizens, but the bishop of nearby Ely was also a major sponsor and soon issues emerged over who was in charge, the town or the bishop. Around 1361 a second leper hospital was built, named after Sts Anthony and Eligius. In the second half of the fifteenth century four almshouses were opened. All these institutions had received the financial and political support of the community of Cambridge and its citizens.[13]

Toulouse and Cambridge were typical examples of the sort of bricks-and-mortar expansion of social welfare that was taking place all over medieval Europe. A data set of English hospitals and almshouses shows that at least 1,000 were active between 1350 and 1599, while another 242 are identified as active before 1350 but ceased to operate by

the middle of the fourteenth century. Although these numbers include rural as well as urban establishments, the latter were overrepresented because market towns had the resources for, and an interest in, providing such public services.[14] The towns of both England and the continent became sprinkled with small – and sometimes also larger – buildings where people in need could find support and shelter. Simultaneously, two other developments were taking place. Towns instituted arrangements for the poor who continued to live in their own accommodation. Secondly, urbanites set up organisations for mutual support. Germanic Europe, including the British Isles, had a greater fondness for the first approach to poor relief, while the second proved more popular in Latin Europe.

In the medieval towns and cities of Flanders, Brabant and Holland, the most important institutions providing poor relief were the *Heilige Geesttafels*, or Tables of the Holy Spirit. These were often literally tables, situated in the back of the parish church, where bread and other forms of support would be handed out.[15] Although they were technically Church institutions, the Tables increasingly came under municipal control.[16] In 's-Hertogenbosch, as in other Brabant towns, the Table had been set up in the local cathedral – in this case in the mid-thirteenth century – to hand out food to the poor. It would continue to do so, although no longer from the church building after the Reformation, until the early nineteenth century. Almost from the beginning, the local secular authorities had an important say in the administration of the Table in 's-Hertogenbosch, and this was explicitly confirmed in a privilege from 1458.[17]

In Lyon the usual plethora of small and medium-sized institutions was supplemented, as of 1534, by an *Aumône générale*, or General Poor Relief, also called *Charité de Lyon*. This institution was the permanent successor to a temporary provision created in 1531 to deal with the acute crisis that had emerged from a confluence of famine, plague and migration from the countryside which threatened to overwhelm the city's existing charitable infrastructure. It was modelled on a similar organisation in Paris. The underlying idea was that the 'deserving poor' who would normally be able to work would be supported in their own homes, once their entitlements had been established. Orphans would be referred to the orphanages and the sick to the Hôtel-Dieu Hospital, while alien paupers were to be removed from the city altogether. It was funded through tax exemptions granted by the king, as well as the

revenues from the meat excise. The main form of support was the distribution of bread. Some poor households would also receive small amounts of money to supplement the family budget.[18]

In 1614 in the city of Münster, an episcopal see with a population of 10,000–11,000, around 400 poor received a weekly distribution of bread from the municipality. During the Middle Ages poor relief in Münster had been the responsibility of the (Catholic) Church and the civic community together. However, the town council oversaw both, and almost inevitably civic charity began to overshadow that of the Church. National legislation from 1530 and 1580 laid the foundation for local poor relief, by ordering '*dass eine jede Stadt und Commun ihre Armen selbst ernehren unde unterhalten*' – 'every town and village shall feed and look after its own poor'. In 1585 this was formalised in a by-law that covered the whole range of local provisions. Initially, the regulations left the existing institutions intact, but another by-law, from 1616, promised the citizens '*guten Ordinanz*' (proper policing) of the poor, by making the system more discriminating. Hence, support would only be available to the '*waren bedürftigen Armen*', the genuine poor, while begging was to be suppressed. Still, Church and town would continue to operate side by side in the provisioning of welfare. The system would be funded through voluntary contributions, but the results were disappointing, so begging was permitted again in 1618, and in 1624 the attempt at centralisation was entirely abandoned. Instead, the council decided to create a workhouse, the first of which was set up in 1645 in the orphanage to instil a proper work ethos in the orphans. More changes were made to the organisation of local poor relief in Münster, but the next radical attempt at centralisation had to wait until the revolutionary decades around 1800.[19]

Centralisation had already been introduced in Exeter in the sixteenth century. In April 1560 an 'Order for the Poore' was entered into the Corporate Act Book. The Order consolidated earlier legislation from 1536 and 1552. 'Distributors' were appointed under the Order with the responsibility of collecting contributions from the inhabitants and distributing the revenues. The beneficiaries were registered in the Book of Distribution. A special Accounts of the Poor was to keep track of the finances. In 1565, 177 paupers received regular support; two years later their number had decreased to 130. On top of their weekly contributions, 350–500 individuals made extra donations to the poor in 1564–65.[20] A fair number of Exeter citizens were thus

involved in sixteenth-century welfare, either as donors or as recipients of benefits.

During the first half of the sixteenth century a wave of initiatives to reform the organisation of charity swept across Europe. In the two decades between 1522 and 1545 alone, at least sixty towns are known to have implemented such reforms.[21] In almost all of them, attempts were made to discriminate more effectively between the 'deserving poor' and those who, by implication, were not deserving of charity. Begging was restricted everywhere. The authorities also attempted to regulate and control the activities of local charities more effectively, if possible by combining foundations into larger organisations. The timing of these reforms suggests some connection with the Reformation, but this is unlikely for two reasons: firstly, reforms were introduced in both Catholic and Protestant regions; secondly, similar reforms had already been introduced long before the Reformation.[22] In some areas, such as Northern Europe, the Reformation clearly had an impact, but it would be wrong to see it as the only reason for the reform of charity.[23] Alternative explanations refer to the rise of capitalism and the attendant emergence of a proletarian class. This was certainly a phenomenon of the late Middle Ages, but it is less clear why precisely the first half of the sixteenth century should have been the turning point in this process.[24] With reforms continuing in the second half of the century and later, two other factors seem to have been equally important. Urban authorities were all the time concerned with the potentially explosive rise in the cost of poor relief. Given the size of the problem, as well as the unpredictability of the seasons and economic fluctuations – premodern economies had no proper 'business cycle' – there was a constant need to be vigilant about the financial implications. At the same time, this was an area where local authorities could demonstrate their competence.[25] While dreading the costs of charity, local elites were also proud of their charitable achievements and built poorhouses 'like palaces'.[26] Towns were copying each other's innovations regardless of region or religion.

In several European countries the related ambitions to control the poor themselves as well as the costs of their maintenance led to a movement that has been labelled in France the '*grand renfermement*', or the great confinement.[27] In Lyon the policy was introduced in 1614, following the example of Paris. Instead of living in their own dwellings, the poor were to be moved to existing hospital buildings, later a purpose-built environment, where they would be permanently supervised

by a professional staff. Municipal authorities were driving this policy, but they were encouraged by the national government and supported by national legislation.[28] The workhouse was the English equivalent of this 'great lock-up'. It was a Dutch invention from the late sixteenth century and was quickly copied around the North Sea.[29] In England the workhouse became very popular in the years around 1700 when, besides the City of London, fourteen towns received a parliamentary licence to set up such institutions which, in combination with a stricter control over parish relief, were supposed to 'win [the poor] into civility and love of their labour'.[30]

Whereas the Mediterranean countries merely expected the institutions to control the poor, the English and Dutch also hoped to make paupers' efforts profitable, or at least sufficient to cover their expenses. It was, however, an expectation that never came to fruition[31] and for precisely this reason the 'great lock up' remained quite limited in terms of the numbers of people directly affected. It was a hugely expensive form of poor relief.

Next to workhouses and transfers of money, food and clothes, mutual support constituted a third strand of poor relief in premodern European towns. As early as 852 the Synod of Reims proclaimed rules designed to curb excesses by confraternities. The implication is that such associations already existed, and in sufficient numbers to merit the precious time of the Church dignitaries present at the synod. Nonetheless, we have little detail about those early confraternities: a date, the name of their patron saint – that is about it. For Spain, some scattered references suggest that confraternities existed in the Peninsula during the Frankish period. In Catalonia one has been identified dating from 986, but a serious increase in numbers only occurred in the eleventh century. In France one of the first confraternities was set up in Poitiers in 1109, but more were found in the south than in the north of France. In the Low Countries, Brussels was probably the first town to have a confraternity, in 1186. In Germany, confraternities were much less common.[32]

We have already discussed the Florentine confraternity of Orsanmichele. Had this been a Venetian organisation, it would have been called a *scuola grande*. There were five such *scuole* in sixteenth-century Venice, and after 1552 six. Next to these, another 100-plus *scuole piccoli* were active.[33] The first *scuole grandi* originated in the thirteenth century. The poor relief they provided went primarily to their

own members, who came from all walks of life. In the beginning, all members had a say in the administration of the *scuola*, but by the sixteenth century the right to vote had become increasingly restricted. The small hospitals the *scuole grandi* owned were also only accessible to members. Membership of Venetian *scuole* was initially restricted by official limits; 500–600 was reckoned to be the maximum. By 1544, however, the Scuola di S. Giovanni had already a membership of about 1,000 and by 1576 this had increased to some 1,800, most of whom obviously came from the less affluent classes in society.[34] Although members of the guilds would routinely join the *scuole grandi* and *piccoli*, some guilds had their own *scuola*, collectively known as the *scuole delle arti*. Among these were organisations of the mercers, the glass-sellers and the boatmen. Some of them had only devotional purposes, but at least the potters and the bakers explicitly looked after their impoverished members, while the tailors, painters and silk-throwsters are known to also have had their own hospital.[35]

It is generally assumed that confraternities were less common in Northern Europe and generally appeared there later. In Emden, in northern Germany, the first were set up only in the fifteenth century; by 1500 there were perhaps ten of them. These confraternities supported both their own members and the general poor. The Confraternity of Our Lady established a hospital for the poor in 1523. The Emden craft guilds did the same; technically they were also confraternities. In 1545 they were ordered to refrain from donations to the Churches and to concentrate their charitable work on poor relief. The Reformation did not cause the confraternities to disappear in Emden, at least not immediately, but the increased activities of the guilds did encourage a shift of pious donations towards the latter, limiting the scope for confraternities.[36]

Rosser's recent research on confraternities and guilds in medieval England has turned up large numbers of confraternities.[37] On the continent equally impressive numbers have been found: between 1300 and 1580 in Utrecht alone as many as 101 confraternities have been recorded, although not all were simultaneously active. Of these, sixteen also ran a hospital, while eight were connected to one of the craft guilds, which in Utrecht they dominated the town council until 1528. One dated from the twelfth century, ten from the thirteenth and thirty-four from the fifteenth. It has been estimated that every second adult male in Utrecht joined at least one, but often more, confraternities during their lifetime. Members were expected to participate once a week in a mass read in front of the

confraternity altar. Indeed, the accounts of three of the Utrecht confraternities from the decades around 1500 show a predominance of religious spending, with poor relief constituting only a very small proportion of the confraternities' expenses. Nonetheless, every Sunday, after mass, the Holy Trinity Confraternity distributed alms in nine different locations, and by 1609 these distributions had become quite substantial.[38] In 1615, when the Utrecht confraternities were dissolved, forty-two were still active, some accepting both Protestants and Catholics among their members, and fifteen of these forty-two confraternities were funding general poor relief.[39] As we saw in Chapter 3, several guilds in Utrecht were also providing poor relief in various forms to their members, including common graves where members and their spouses could be buried if they could not afford a family grave of their own.

The Utrecht data suggest that, even in a city where confraternities were just as numerous as in the towns and cities of Latin Europe, their role in the provisioning of poor relief, both to their own members and to the general poor, was not as important as that of their southern counterparts. Instead, northern towns relied more on communal organisations, regulated and overseen by the municipal authorities. Hospitals were a common feature of urban life everywhere in Europe, with urban authorities and the Church both involved in welfare, but across the centuries a shift is observable from religious to public organisations.[40] Tellingly, the Parisian authorities stated in 1544 that, 'following the Edict of the King, the town must humbly accept the charge of the poor'. In fact, it had accepted that responsibility much earlier, when reforms were introduced in the second half of the fifteenth century.[41] Moreover, accepting this charge did not mean that the Church was completely absolved from the care of the poor; the shift from Church to public welfare remained partial.[42] The main point to take from our survey, however, is that premodern European urban communities always offered formalised support to their inhabitants, and that this support came in a bewildering array of institutional arrangements. Many attempts were made to reduce the complexity of the system, but these efforts were only partially successful.

Who Benefitted?

It would seem self-evident that social welfare was concerned with the 'poor', but who, exactly, were 'the poor'? Take the situation in

Berlin. By 1750 the city had 113,000 inhabitants, of whom 1,384, or one in eighty-two inhabitants, received support from local charities. In 1801 the city had grown by slightly more than 50 per cent to 173,000 inhabitants, but the number of people on benefits had increased almost tenfold, to 12,254. Now one in every fourteen Berliners was receiving benefits.[43] It is, of course, possible that Berlin was going through a stage of massive impoverishment; after all, this was the age of revolutionary warfare, even if Berlin itself would only be occupied by French troops five years later. The point is, however, that it is equally possible that the authorities in 1801 counted every individual on benefits, whereas in 1750 only the heads of households, or that in 1801 the figures included people on long-term benefits as well as those receiving only incidental support, while the latter were not included in the 1750 figures. In Venice, in the mid-seventeenth century, 1,945 people or 1.5 per cent of the population were living in the city's various hospitals for the poor. This was a massive increase over the previous half-century, because in 1593 those same hospitals had been home to only 1,290 people or 1 per cent of the city, and in 1550 the percentage had been a mere 0.5 per cent.[44] Did poverty increase so vastly, or did Venice simply lock up more of its paupers? It is also highly unlikely that this was the whole pauper population of that once prosperous city, now in decline.

These two examples serve to underline the fact that we are not currently in a position to produce consistent, comparable data for pre-modern Europe that would allow us to say that some countries had more paupers than others, or that some eras were worse than others.[45] It is quite possible that the rise of a market economy (or 'capitalism') led to a massive increase of the impoverished class in society, because an increasing share of the population became dependent on wage labour, where contracts were very insecure and wages were low.[46] Certainly, connections between labour markets and welfare reform have been demonstrated on a local level.[47] In a similar vein, the rising rate of urbanisation may well have contributed to larger numbers of poor people, but was this because the poor flocked to the towns, with their more developed welfare systems, or because towns 'made' people poorer?[48] A related explanation is the increasing inequality as it occurred across the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The trend is not very strong, and the data are so limited that we cannot draw firm conclusions, but they do suggest that, at least in the economically most dynamic regions (Italy, the Low Countries, England), inequality was rising.[49]

Whatever circumstances made people poor, the figures that we have do not seem to point to a strong increase over time, or larger numbers of poor in the centres of capitalism compared to provincial towns.[50] What we can say is that at any point in time, substantial numbers of poor people were dependent, to a greater or lesser extent, on material and financial support provided by public organisations in their home towns. Rather than concentrating on the overall numbers, however, if we want to get some sense of whom the system was actually reaching, and in what ways, we need to break down those totals into the various subcategories of the population at risk.

In 1573 the priests of Toledo were ordered to draw up lists of the local poor – 'secretly and quietly, so that negotiations and importunities do not occur'.[51] This directive already implies that the definition of poverty was negotiated by those concerned. Given the material benefits implied in inclusion on the list, this is hardly surprising. Poor people also sometimes asked to be removed from the lists, because they refused to accept the conditions imposed by the authorities. As it was, the 'poor' of Toledo in 1573 displayed a specific gender pattern. In all six parishes for which the lists survive, the majority of paupers were female. In fourteenth-century Florence, women were between two-thirds and three-quarters of the paupers supported by Orsanmichele. In the Toledo hospitals, however, the majority of inmates were male, often under twenty-five years of age. These hospitals were primarily taking care of migrants, and that might explain the specific composition of their population.[52]

In 1603 St Martins-in-the-Field, in central London, was home to 2,950 parishioners, of whom 52 were receiving permanent support, while another 123 households were helped intermittently.[53] If we count the individuals, 6 per cent of the parish could be qualified as 'poor', but if their dependants are included the percentage could easily be 20 per cent. This group was described by a contemporary as 'unable to doe anye worke towards their lyving, as old, decrepit persons, creeples and infantes'. The same commentator observed that 'the negligent poore, being otherwise sturdie and able to earne their whole lyving if they were well sett on worke', were barred from charity.[54] In Zwolle, a town of 10,000–13,000 inhabitants in one of the less dynamic regions of the Dutch Republic, on average 248 households were receiving structural benefits during the latter half of the seventeenth century. Because the average pauper household was relatively small, this

amounted to 5 per cent of the population. Two-thirds of these households were headed by single women or widows. Of the adult paupers, 44 per cent were over sixty. Of 6,227 individuals found in the various welfare administrations in Zwolle between 1650 and 1700, 987, or 16 per cent, were suffering from health problems, varying from relatively short illnesses to permanent disabilities.[55] During the same period in Delft, a town about twice as large and located in the more dynamic western part of the country, the percentage of permanently supported households was significantly higher, at 10–15 per cent. In 1645 two-thirds of the adult pauper population were females.[56]

There can be little doubt that benefits were pitched in such a way that they discouraged the poor from becoming dependent on welfare, and instead encouraged them to make themselves available for work. The allowance that poor families usually received was simply insufficient to survive on. In 1819, one of Leiden's overseers of the poor acknowledged this in so many words: '[T]he support exists almost always ... as a very sober distribution of money and bread, only meant to meet their needs but hardly sufficient to sustain an animal life'.[57] This was said in a country that, reputedly, had one of the most generous welfare systems in the world at the time. Most poor families in most places therefore had no choice but to go out and find work that gave them additional income, even if they were very young, very old or otherwise disadvantaged. As far as one can tell, all the Leiden poor on benefits in 1750 had a job, the overwhelming majority in the textile industry that dominated the local economy.[58]

In Delft in 1645, the occupations of 569 men and sixty-nine women on benefits demonstrate that these poor people too were expected to work and could not rely on charity alone. At that time, more than half of the males and a full two-thirds of the females worked in industry, with the textile industry again figuring prominently. For males the army was an equally important employer, whilst the female poor in Delft were also frequently employed as domestic servants.[59] Among almost 6,000 beggars arrested in Paris in the eighteenth century we see a very similar pattern. These people may have been temporarily out of work, but the great majority of them could specify either an industrial trade – half the men and 40 per cent of the women – or other occupation as their normal source of income.[60] In Aix-en-Provence unskilled workers without fixed contracts and craftsmen were over-represented among those receiving benefits in the eighteenth

century, while servants and – remarkably – soldiers were under-represented.[61] In the second half of the 1780s, almost two-thirds of the poor supported with loaves of bread in Lyon worked in the local textile industry; another 20 per cent were artisans.[62] On the basis of data from Trier, Augsburg and Antwerp spanning the late sixteenth to late eighteenth centuries, Jütte concluded that the 'distribution of occupational groups among poor relief recipients displays in almost "classic" fashion the profile of a pre-industrial urban economy'. In Cologne, he added, 70 per cent of those on relief in 1798 were suffering from illness and old age, the remainder simply from 'low wages'.[63]

These examples highlight varieties in gender, age and employment. In general it seems fair to say that women were more likely to be on benefits than men, due to the combined burden of low pay and their responsibility for taking care of children. Likewise, the very young and the very old were more likely to receive benefits than people in their twenties through to their fifties, who were more competitive on the labour market. Another substantial group of people was on incidental benefits: those for whom seasonal fluctuations and the type of their employment largely determined when they were at risk. In effect, for those in work, poor relief was a supplement to wages that were insufficient to survive on. The profile – women, elderly, physically impaired – also implies that poverty could potentially hit everyone without savings or family support – which meant a considerable part of the artisan population.

Summarising, despite complaints about welfare abuses, people on benefits were usually genuinely poor because they were, for physical or psychiatric reasons, unable to work enough to make ends meet. A second group depended on temporary benefits when they were in dire straits, whether because of the seasonal factor, an epidemic or some other misfortune. There was no separate 'pauper class'; large sections of the urban population were more or less permanently at risk of impoverishment.

Funding Welfare

Welfare was funded from a variety of sources, a mixture of compulsory and voluntary contributions. The situation in the small town of Emden, halfway through the sixteenth century, was probably fairly typical. Traditionally, the Emden population had paid a

Huusdelinge, or household rate, half of which was for the parish and half for the funding of welfare expenditures. While the surrounding county of East Frisia became Lutheran, Emden itself emerged as a northern hotbed of Calvinism. In 1557 Lutheran poor relief was separated from the municipal provisions and made voluntary. The *Becken* or bowl was administered by their own deacons. Emden's municipal administrators of the poor, however, resisted this separation. Meanwhile, Protestant refugees had been moving into Emden across the border from the Low Countries and in 1557 special deacons had to be appointed to take care of these immigrants. In 1562 a lottery was organised to raise extra funds for the local hospital, or *Gasthaus*. The deacons responsible for the refugees also introduced a 'voluntary tax' to fund their increased activities; each 'nation' – Hollanders, Brabanters and so on – was supposed to contribute according to its number.[64] Thus we see the Emden charitable institutions, under pressure of the changes brought along by Reformation and rebellion, experimenting with a range of instruments to deal with the needs that inevitably emerged in the wake of these momentous events.

Most medieval and early modern towns used a combination of public and private funding for their welfare programmes. The two were mainly distinguished by the way these contributions were collected: compulsory versus voluntary, but within those two broad categories a variety of instruments was available to local authorities.[65] In Delft, for example, whenever someone passed away, her or his best piece of clothing was supposed to go to the poor.[66] The classic case of rate-based funding, however, was England, where national legislation concerning the funding of poor relief was introduced in 1536 requiring parishes to hold weekly collections for the poor. London had already introduced such parish collections in 1533, setting an example for the rest of the country. Repeated national legislation in the following decades strongly suggests that what looked like decisive action on paper was not so easily implemented in practice. Only with the Poor Law of 1572, consolidated in 1598 and 1601, was the system set on a secure footing, with the introduction of a compulsory contribution to welfare, collected by the parish. Several towns, including Chester, York and Hull, quickly set up an administration of poor households entitled to benefit from the scheme, but in other places there was opposition to this new type of taxation. It required the crisis of the 1590s, and the threat to public order created by the misery of starving paupers, to win over the

sceptics and make the poor rate generally acceptable. By the end of the seventeenth century £40,000 was raised by the poor rate in London alone, 10 per cent of the national proceeds.[67]

The introduction of a poor rate was generally unpopular. In Odense, Denmark in 1632, for example, it was as controversial as it had been in England.[68] In 's-Hertogenbosch, the citizens were therefore fortunate not to require such compulsory contributions, at least not in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here, the main institutions for poor relief, i.e. the municipal Table of the Holy Spirit and the nine district funds, mainly relied on endowments created in the late Middle Ages. By the early sixteenth century the Table of the Holy Spirit had accumulated more than forty farms, an endowment that it carefully managed and preserved over the coming centuries. The produce from the farms was made into bread in the institution's own bakery and from there passed on to the poor. When poverty increased, per capita support was ruthlessly diminished to protect the investment portfolio.[69]

Although healthy endowments were the result of wise financial management by previous generations of charity administrators, they ultimately originated from voluntary donations to the institutions in the past. The current income of many charities similarly depended on the goodwill of various social groups in local society to donate to the welfare system. Such donations may have been voluntary, but social pressures were at work to nudge people towards charity. In sixteenth-century Lyon, for example, notaries were regularly reminded by the town council of their moral duty to encourage clients to include the poor in their testaments.[70]

The modern literature on charitable giving suggests a number of mechanisms that might have encouraged them to do so. At a very general level, many people are altruistic and sympathise with the plight of others, requiring only to be made aware of need to trigger donations. At the same time, donors see benefits for themselves: charitable giving enhances one's reputation, and many people derive satisfaction from doing 'good'. Such benefaction may also be stimulated by ideological or religious encouragement. Certainly, people today give more easily when solicited for donations, but they also want to know that their gift makes a difference, and that it will be spent on the poor, rather than administration or fancy folders.[71] It is impossible to put some of these mechanisms to the test in past situations, but several of them – such as proximity, solicitation and reputation – are clearly evident in the

historical record. The fact that most of this charitable giving occurred within relatively small communities, where the poor were not some anonymous group but real people whom donors met on their own doorstep, would have reinforced the power of these mechanisms.

Charitable giving came in sizes.[72] Most people gave regularly to church collections, for example, where the individual contributions were small, but the totals could add up.[73] In the Dutch town of Sneek (4,000 inhabitants during the seventeenth century) about a third of the money available for poor relief was collected every month in door-to-door collections where people donated in an open plate. The very consistent revenues suggest that the inhabitants of Sneek gave a standard sum on these occasions. In the early eighteenth century, the welfare institutions were nonetheless short of funding, so in 1715 it was decided to hold an extra annual collection, for which the members of the town council would go round in person to encourage generous contributions. Only in 1775 was a poor tax introduced in Sneek.[74] In Amsterdam the reformed deacons also made the rounds on a monthly basis; for the purpose members of the Reformed Church had a special sign of the letter L, for *lidmaat* or member, attached to the front of their house. Such collections funded more than 40 per cent of the Reformed poor relief in Amsterdam.[75]

In Italy, the membership dues for confraternities could be seen as a similar form of small voluntary contributions. Much of it was spent on the membership of the confraternity, but substantial amounts also went to the 'general' poor.[76] Between 1610 and 1630 the London parish of All Hallows Lombard Street collected annually £30–40 in poor rates, but also £17–24 from voluntary contributions. In another London parish, St Bride Fleet Street, collections and donations were regularly higher than the revenues of the poor rate, while in a third London parish, St Dunstan in the West, the rates were higher in some years but fell behind voluntary contributions in others.[77]

The London results comprise more than just collections; they also include a second type of voluntary contributions, i.e. gifts. These were given both during the donor's lifetime, and after she or he had passed away, as a result of a bequest. In late medieval York, Thomas Bracebrigg ordered 1,000 loaves of bread to be distributed among the local poor after his death, while Robert de Holme left 100 marks for cloth for the 'poor pater familias' and another 100*s* for shoes for the poor. Elena, wife of Adam Milys, in 1387 left all her clothes, while

Agnes Hustlott, a dyer's widow, left both clothing and cloth to the poor.[78]

In seventeenth-century Amsterdam at some point one administrator of the Catholic poor reported a gift 'of five hundred guilders, left at his house by a donor who wished to remain anonymous, in a brown envelope with the word "charity" inscribed on it'. Another had received 1,500 guilders – a very substantial amount – that 'had been thrown into his house one evening, without him knowing the source of the money'.[79] Much more common, however, were the gifts that people included in their testaments. In Zwolle, depending on the precise decade, 50–70 per cent of testaments included a – usually small – gift to the poor. This contrasted markedly with Leiden and Utrecht, where only 5–20 per cent of testators included the poor as their benefactors; they gave, however, on average substantially more than their Zwolle counterparts.[80] Still, the Zwolle figures were not completely out of range. In eighteenth-century Aix-en-Provence, some 70 per cent of testaments contained a donation to the poor, and some of those donations could be substantial. In 1744, for example, tailor Jean Louis Dorée left 500 livres for this purpose.[81] Finally, unknown amounts were donated by administrators who were expected to fill gaps in the day-to-day running of the charities entrusted to them. There were regular complaints about this aspect of their responsibilities.[82]

Most voluntary contributions were supplied by ordinary citizens, rather than the elites.[83] Two precious sources from Zwolle demonstrate this. In the mid-1660s the inhabitants of Zwolle were asked to donate to the building of a new orphanage. All households were listed in a large register, and their future donations were subsequently pencilled in. A donation was recorded for 82 per cent of households and for those who declined the invitation a proper excuse was usually provided: they were too poor, or had passed away in the meantime. The Zwolle City Poor Chamber kept meticulous records, not just of the amounts of monthly donations to the citywide collections, but also of the type of coins people donated. It can therefore be established that on average 1.5 coin was donated per household, 61 per cent in pennies, the smallest possible amount, strongly suggesting that these were handed in by the working-class inhabitants. Data from Delft in 1749 demonstrate that the rich districts of that town donated substantially more to charitable causes than the poor – but that the poor districts were donating as well.[84]

This contribution by the poor is easily overlooked, perhaps because the elites did make the most visible contributions – specifically in the form of private foundations, the third and most substantial form of voluntary charity. Late medieval York had about twenty almshouses, set up by individuals during their lifetime. Robert de Holme, prior of York, had one erected in the Monkgate area during the 1350s.[85] Almost every premodern town had several, sometimes dozens, of small hospitals, poorhouses or chambers, created by an individual benefactor, or a couple. Most Dutch towns had their *hofjes*, literally courtyards, and other types of almshouses, named after their generous donors. It would cost 20,000–30,000 guilders to create such an institution. Very often they were set up by people expecting to die without any children to whom they might otherwise have bequeathed their fortune.[86] Their name would instead be preserved for future generations through the foundation they had helped to create. The importance of this personal identification of benefactors was also visible in places where they could not impose their own name on the institution as a whole. The Ospedale di Carità in Turin accepted busts and memorial tablets of its most prominent benefactors, to be displayed in the corridors, refectories, dormitories and courtyards. Not only the poor were reminded of their generosity, but so were the benefactors' peers whenever they visited the hospital.[87]

Supporting the poor gave rise to much soul-searching on the part of the donors. Two principles – still very much underpinning the policies of modern welfare states – underlay all forms of support, but were particularly pronounced where money and goods changed hands. On one hand it was felt that the poor were entitled to alms from their wealthier fellow citizens because they were poor through no fault of their own. Illness, handicaps, the early death of the head of the household, numerous offspring, let alone poor harvests or harsh winters – none of these could be directly blamed on their victims. Poverty, from this point of view, was a question of bad luck. These were the 'deserving' poor. At the same time, donating money, food, clothes and so on might well create the wrong incentives. Lazy profiteers were bound to prefer benefits over work. Were all the poor really in need? In the sixteenth century several popular tracts, most famously one published in Bruges by the Spanish scholar Juan Luis Vives in 1526 under the title *De subventione pauperum*, suggested that generous handouts had created a class of people who preferred to live as beggars. Vives wanted to

restrict access to charity to the 'deserving' poor. That in itself was not a novel idea; after all, did anyone propose to give charity to people who did not need it? What Vives really had in mind was what we would now call 'welfare dependence', that is a class of people so accustomed to charity that they were unable to fit into a work rhythm. The importance of his work was not so much in the analysis, but in the remedy he proposed. Vives called upon welfare institutions to exert greater control over their charges. He wanted the civic authorities to investigate and register the poor and establish who among them might be able to work, and who was genuinely incapable. Vives is often charged with promoting the centralisation of poor relief, and given the numerous institutions providing poor relief in any single town of premodern Europe, this might have been a remedy against 'charity shopping'; but in fact he merely proposed that the local government would make sure that the institutions worked properly, that is gave help to those who needed it and helped the others to find jobs.[88]

Still, we have to realise that the 'poor' were, to an important extent, also taking care of themselves. Guild and confraternity charity were funded by, but also for the benefit of, the membership. In Zamora, Spain, with its population of c. 8,600 in the mid-sixteenth century, 150 confraternities of usually thirty to forty members acted as mutual aid groups. Most of them were mixed in social terms.[89] The members in many Italian medieval confraternities were primarily artisans. Figures concerning Perugia and Assisi in the sixteenth century suggest that between a quarter and a third of the adult population may have joined at least one confraternity.[90] As we saw in the previous chapter, around 1800 one in five Amsterdam households was covered by guild insurance, while in Utrecht and Leiden the percentage was perhaps twice as high.[91] In Amsterdam, Utrecht and Leiden, moreover, the journeymen, who were normally excluded from guild welfare, had their own mutual assistance. In Utrecht these were especially numerous: ten are known to have existed at some point during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of which five were still operating in 1812, when together they had 1,500 members.[92]

It has been suggested that voluntary giving was 'crowded out' by compulsory rates, and as a result declined over time. In England this development may have taken place during the seventeenth century, a period of strong increases in welfare spending. The decline was therefore more relative than absolute, as voluntary donations remained

significant.[93] However, it is quite possible that the figures capture only a part of the total sums donated, and omit substantial parts.[94] The decrease in voluntary contributions in the Dutch Republic during the eighteenth century may have been due more to the changed fortunes of the Dutch Republic after its golden age came to an end, than to 'crowding out'.[95]

Bas van Bavel and Auke Rijpma have attempted to estimate the overall levels of welfare spending in premodern European societies in relation to the total size of their economies.[96] Their figures are inevitably approximations because the evidence is fragmented. Nonetheless, their figures do suggest some interesting features of welfare spending before the welfare state. First and foremost, no European society spent even 5 per cent of its total wealth on poor relief, a percentage that should be compared with modern levels of 20 per cent and more in the affluent societies of the post-war world. However, we should keep in mind that most Western countries did not do much better in the first half of the twentieth century than the best performers – the Low Countries and England – managed before 1800.[97] After those strong performers, the next group, which included Italy and France, spent between 0.5 and 2 per cent of GDP on poor relief. Central European countries may have done worse, but we have no way of knowing. There are no indications that poor relief in German towns was substantially lower than in Italian or Dutch towns.

Their figures also allow us to make very rough calculations on the contribution of welfare to the total budget of an average poor household in premodern Europe. If we assume that, taken together, the poorest 20 per cent of the population earned 5 per cent of GDP, then it looks as if welfare added half of that percentage to their total earnings in the most generous regions, and perhaps a quarter in the less well-endowed countries. In total, welfare may thus have added between a fifth and a third to the total budget of the poor. This percentage would have been higher for those on permanent relief, and lower for individuals and households who received only temporary benefits.

The scattered data that we have on the funding and spending of poor relief institutions demonstrate that at least the most generous societies spent at levels which remained normal throughout the nineteenth century and even in the run-up to World War II. Much of the money raised for the support of people unable to earn their own livelihood through the labour market came from voluntary donations. Like

modern welfare states, premodern authorities were constantly trying to make the system more efficient.[98] For the towns in the Low Countries, three major waves of reforms have been identified: one in the early sixteenth century, discussed earlier; a second in the decades around 1600, when the Dutch Republic emerged as a separate country and the Reformation was introduced, and a third at the end of the eighteenth century, during the revolutionary era.[99] None of these produced a stable result. Expedients like forced labour were repeatedly reintroduced, to be abandoned again after a few years. Forced labour was recommended by Vives in the Habsburg Netherlands in the early sixteenth century and still tried in Hamburg in the late eighteenth. Hamburg, however, was not the only town to discover that forced labour was so inefficient that it very quickly proved unsustainable. There was no simple solution to the problem of poverty, and as long as starving the poor to death was not an acceptable option, communities and their authorities had to set aside money to cope with their destitute fellow creatures.

Conclusions

From the point of view of citizenship, several features stand out in the history of welfare in premodern Europe. Even though, with very few exceptions, nobody had a legal entitlement to poor relief, all urban communities in Europe provided elaborate welfare arrangements on which the poor in those communities could exercise at least a moral claim. There are strong indications that elites were aware of the fact that they themselves had a real stake in providing poor relief: public order, health and labour market concerns were all given as reasons to help the poor. The poor, from their side, could expect some help, if they behaved properly, and if they were willing to work when work was available.[100]

Premodern European towns used a wide range of institutional arrangements to deliver poor relief. We find those institutions existing side by side in most communities. Over the centuries many attempts were made to increase the efficiency of the system, in terms of control over the poor and financial sustainability, through centralisation, and the merging of smaller institutions into larger. It is, however, not at all evident that one solution was markedly better than the rest. As a result, various set-ups continued to exist, with little convergence towards an 'optimal' model.[101]

The middle and upper classes reacted to the plight of the poor by devoting both time and money to poor relief. Under various sorts of pressure, a remarkable amount of the funds for poor relief was raised through voluntary contributions. While the poor were not legally entitled to support, the non-poor could not be legally compelled to contribute. 'Proximity' to the poor, in terms of religious, occupational, neighbourhood or urban community, nonetheless encouraged large numbers of urbanites to donate small, but sometimes also very substantial, sums of money for their relief. Poor relief thus contributed, imperfectly but nonetheless significantly, to the creation of an urban community.