1.3. The provision of poor relief in rural Europe. Part I

Panel organiser: Marfany, Julie, University of Oxford, UK

Outside of England, the provision of poor relief in the countryside in the past is a neglected topic, in part because it was minimal compared to the provision of relief by large urban institutions and in part because of a lack of evidence. Nonetheless, those historians who have studied rural poor relief have shown that many types of assistance were available for the poor, such as local hospitals, bread doles, dovery funds, other endowed charities, confraternities and almshouses of different kinds. By and large, these forms of charity were private, though sometimes administered by public bodies. More recent work has stressed that these forms of private charity were important even in England, operating alongside statutory poor relief as part of a mixed economy welfare. What has largely not been addressed for anywhere in Europe is the role and significance of such charities. Were funds adequate enough to provide relief in any systematic and sustained fashion? What contribution could they make to the household ‘economy of make-shifts’? Did migration to the cities represent the only option in times of hardship? How did poor relief change over time? In posing these questions, historians also need to consider the different relationships between family and poor relief that may have existed. Richard Smith and Peter Solar have suggested that the English poor law provided a safety net that helped families maintain a minimum standard of living, instead of simply offering a refuge for the elderly. This raises the question of how poor relief may have functioned in association with family networks in other rural European areas. The papers presented in these two panels investigate the role of poor relief, broadly defined, for different areas of rural Europe.

Chair: Marfany, Julie, University of Oxford, UK


1.3.1. Rural poor relief in the coastal Netherlands: from a ‘collective insurance’ to a ‘supplement-system’ (Groningen 1770-1860)

Paping, Richard, University of Groningen, Netherlands

Between 1770 and 1790 average real expenditure on rural poor relief was a third higher than after 1795 in the market-oriented and wealthy Dutch coastal province Groningen. Before 1790 rural poor were relatively well-fed and well-clothed and comprised mainly of elderly, disabled, orphans and widows with children. Poor relief was organised by the middle groups and an overwhelming majority of the inhabitants contributed to it. The distance between poor and non-poor was relatively small and poor relief functioned as a local collective insurance system against personal hardships. After 1790 this collective insurance system was undermined. Revolutions of poor relief administrations fell exactly when high agricultural prices made farmers extremely rich and real earnings of other inhabitants decreased. Rapidly growing differences in rural wealth resulted in larger social distances. For rich farmers, it became difficult to imagine that they ran a risk of becoming poor themselves. Consequently, as the main potential financial supporters, they lost interest in a generous system and did not raise their contributions when after 1825/1830 rural poor relief came under financial pressure. An ongoing process of proletarianisation had augmented the share of potential poor, while their real wages persistently decreased. Because food was a very large part of their budget, poor were heavily hit by the rise of agricultural prices compared to industrial prices. As the share of paupers doubled, the contribution per pauper halved. Support fell to a level impossible to live from exclusively and poor relief changed in a system of supplementing other sources of income.

1.3.2. Poverty and the Fabric of Daily Life in Rural England, 1762-1834: a case study

French, Henry, University of Exeter, UK

Existing research on the ‘old’ poor law in England has focused heavily on the relatively small group of regular relief recipients – the 5-15% of inhabitants who received weekly pensions. The reason is simple – their names are recorded consistently in the parish records. By contrast, it is much more difficult to research the far larger group of recipients, who were granted short-term or one-off payments. Conventional wisdom suggests that because the bulk of expenditure was concentrated on the small group of regular and most needy recipients, they were the most significant group in the study of English poor relief. However, to understand how poor relief became integrated into the fabric of rural society, it is important to consider this larger and more disparate group of occasional recipients. This paper undertakes such a study for the Essex village of Terling, covering all poor relief payments from 1762 to 1834. It analyses 148,000 individual payments made to 1,538 recipients through this period. Short-term payments were frequently relatively large sums. By analysing these payments as part of a weekly earnings pattern, the paper reveals how the poor law functioned as an adaptive, dynamic system. It also shows how the crisis of 1798-1801 marked a decisive turning-point in the function, scope and scale of poor relief in Terling (as elsewhere in southern England). This research will be set in the context of a series of parish-poor case investigations into the earning capacity of pauper households in 1801, 1803, 1809 and 1811.

1.3.3. Rural poor relief in the Netherlands around 1800

Looijesteijn, Henk, International Institute for Social History, Netherlands

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As in most countries, the study of rural poor relief in the Netherlands has been rather neglected, partly because of the predominance of the city in early modern Dutch life, partly because of a lack of source material. The fragmentation of the federal early modern Dutch Republic further prevented a clear assessment of the manner in which the rural poor were assisted. During the newly-formed Batavian Republic, attempts were made to centralize Dutch government. Twice, in 1798 and 1806, a massive nationwide survey was undertaken, which allowed us to study Dutch poor relief, private and public, in urban and rural; on both poor level, and by and large more or less as it had been during the eighteenth century. In this paper we will look at what kinds of rural poor relief institutions were in place, and how these were distributed over the country, how many and which kind of people could be assisted by them, and if and why there were regional differences. We will combine the data from the surveys with our databases on almshouses and orphanages in the Netherlands, and compare our results with the few studies available on the countryside in the Netherlands. Thus we will come to an assessment of the importance of rural poor relief in the Netherlands.