



Poverty: A History

Bronislaw Geremek

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The rich and those in authority in church and state have, over the centuries, expressed mixed feelings about the poor, oscillating between pity and fear, compassion and revulsion. Why this should have been so, the effects it had on private and public actions, and the changing nature and origins of the poor themselves form the subject of this book. A great sweep of time is covered, from the first millenium to the present day. Even in the Middle Ages, the author suggests, there was little sentimentality about the poor - other than for those who chose to be so - and charity was valued as a way of excusing what was kept. Then the poor had functions, as the means of securing divine salvation through the giving of alms, and as contractors who would pray for their benefactors. But with the economic crises that afflicted Europe in the 16th century, mass poverty came to be seen as harmful, dangerous and a source of instability: the poor must be forbidden to beg and, lest they stole, provided with work. Most of the principles of modern poor relief were now formulated, in parishes, cities and nationally. Few of these arrangements succeeded for long. The scale of poverty was increasing: first through rural change in which farmers became landless labourers; then through industrial change when craftsmen lost their status and independence and took uncertain employment in large industries. If absolute poverty was less evident, the gap between rich and poor had become more manifest. It is here, Dr Geremek shows, that the utopian ideals of socialism were born. Unrest could be contained in state welfare schemes, or it could be manipulated into revolution, and the poor once more enslaved - this time in the name of their own interests. This book shows how central the role of poverty has been throughout the history of Europe. It casts a fresh perspective on the actions of individuals, groups and nations, and on the underlying nature of the greatest social changes the continent has experienced.

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