Leadership University *Reprint*

Reprinted from First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life • June/July 1992 • Number 24

Books in Review

Poverty And Compassion: The Moral Imagination Of The Late Victorians

Character and Poverty

Poverty And Compassion: The Moral Imagination Of The Late Victorians. By Gertrude Himmelfarb. *Knopf. 475 pp. $30.*

Reviewed by Jerry Z. Muller

GERTRUDE HIMMELFARB'S *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age,* published in 1984, examined the debate on poverty in British thought from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* of 1776 through the mid-nineteenth century. The book was remarkable for its scope. It followed debates about the nature and causes of poverty through the realms of political economy, politics and pamphleteering, legislation, literature, and journalism. Its successor, *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians,* is more tightly focused chronologically and thematically. It deals with the most significant attempts to delineate the nature and extent of poverty and the solutions offered from the 1880s through the social legislation of the years preceding the First World War.

Once again, as in Himmelfarb's previous works of intellectual history, we are transported into a time and place far from our own, yet not so far as to be entirely unfamiliar, and allowed to converse-skeptically, but without condescension-with serious men and women about the most serious issues. She is one of that small band of academic intellectual historians still writing for that mythical beast, the intelligent general reader. The clarity and precision of her style mirror the qualities of her mind, and though in the text she wears her learninglightly, the weight of her footnotes displays that most Victorian of virtues-industry. Himmelfarb chronicles the burst of late Victorian reformism with great empathy, though her tone is more skeptical than celebratory. Her skepticism begins with the "rediscovery" of poverty in the 1880s-which she shows was unrelated to actual economic trends-and extends to recent historians who she believes have mischaracterized the aims and claims of some of her leading protagonists.

For intellectual historians of Victorian England, the issue of the relationship between morality and religion comes with the territory. Himmelfarb has dealt most concisely with the topic in her essays "The Victorian Angst" in *Victorian Minds* (1968) and "The Victorian Trinity: Religion, Science, Morality" in *Marriage and Morals among the Historians* (1986). But the theme runs through many of her works, from her first book on Lord Acton, through her study of the origins and consequences of the Darwinian revolution, and now again in *Poverty and Compassion.*

IN THE LATE Victorian age, she shows, Christianity was reinterpreted as morality, morality was transformed into a Religion of Humanity, and compassion became a science. The obsession of Victorian intellectuals with morality, she writes, was fueled by religious doubt: their inability to embrace what they knew to be the traditional source of morality led them to overcome their doubts by proving that post-Christian morality was indeed possible. Far from leaving them morally enervated, the Victorians' crisis of faith left them with "a conscience that was called upon to do what religion no longer had the authority to prescribe and what utilitarianism refused in principle to prescribe." Charles Booth, the businessman and social investigator to whom the largest portion of *Poverty and Compassion* is devoted, was paradigmatic in this regard, an embodiment of what Beatrice Webb, his cousin by marriage and erstwhile collaborator, called "the union of faith in the scientific method with the transference of the emotion and self-sacrificing service from God to man."

The redirection of sentiments of subordination to some higher purpose from God to humanitarianism that fueled philanthropy and social reform had as its intrinsic danger the substitution of sentimentality for effective benevolence. It is the ability of her Victorian protagonists to avoid this recurrent temptation which Himmelfarb emphasizes in her aphoristic introduction to the book. "In its sentimental mode," she notes, "compassion is an exercise in moral indignation, in feeling good rather than doing good; this mode recognizes no principle of proportion, because feeling, unlike reason, knows no proportion, no limit, no respect for the constraints of policy or prudence. In its unsentimental mode, compassion seeks above all to *do* good, and this requires a stern sense of proportion, of reason and self-control. The late Victorians, as this book abundantly demonstrates, differed greatly on the best way of doing good. But they were agreed that what was important was to do good to others rather than to feel good themselves. Indeed, they were painfully aware that it was sometimes necessary to feel bad in order to do good-to curb their own compassion and restrain their benevolent impulses in the best interests of those they were trying to serve."

Though the activists of the Charity Organization Society (the subject of another chapter) made a religion of charity, they too tried to constrain their passion by the scientific concern for the results of benevolent action. In contrast to the Gospel's injunction "When thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth," she shows that "their science required the left hand to know precisely what the right hand was doing, and made it a solemn obligation *not* to give to everyone who asketh." Indeed they were critical of the Salvation Army, which practiced an older kind of philanthropy derived more directly from Christianity than from the new and secular science of benevolence.

THE DESIRE to combine compassion with a stern sense of proportion gave rise to empirical social research, intended to provide a more accurate picture of the social, economic, and cultural structure of the poor and of the working classes. Booth's seventeen-volume survey of the *Life and Labour of the People of London* was the most formidable and influential product of the quest to base benevolent action upon reliable knowledge. As Himmelfarb shows, for Booth and for most of his fellow-Victorian reformers, reliable, empirical knowledge about the poor did not mean ignoring the role of character in explaining the causes and nature of poverty. Nor, as for some conservatives, did it entail the assumption that the character of the poor was an adequate explanation of poverty.

For Booth, describing the poor "as they actually exist" included their attitudes and habits as much as their income and occupation. Indeed an important goal of his project was to distinguish between what he saw as the divers sources of poverty, namely questions of employment (lack of work or low pay), questions of character (idleness, drunkenness, or thriftlessness), and questions of circumstance (sickness or large families). One-half to two-thirds of poverty was due to problems of employment, he calculated. Booth's major innovation, as Himmelfarb sees it, was to distinguish classes *among* the poor, allowing the public imagination to focus on the "deserving" or "working" poor, whose poverty was due to employment and circumstance, and were regarded as "helpable" and as worthy objects of concern. Out of this understanding came a series of government measures such as unemployment insurance and old age pensions intended to improve the lot of the "respectable workmen" who were normally employed but unable to make ends meet because of circumstances beyond their control.

To some leftist historians, the fact that Booth and others suggested the reform of capitalism after having documented the reality of poverty is evidence of the reformers' inability to transcend their class biases and recognize that the solution lay in socialism. Himmelfarb shows that far from some unconscious oversight, Booth's reformist plans followed from his often-articulated assumption that on the whole it was capitalism that was responsible for the demonstrable rise in the standard of living of the poor and of the working classes. He advocated state assistance for the poor in order to allow the majority of the working class to thrive through their own initiative.

As Himmelfarb shows in her analysis of the writings of late Victorian intellectuals, from the philosopher T. H. Green through the economist Alfred Marshall, and even the single-tax guru Henry George, recognition of the inadequacies of laissez-faire capitalism did not lead most of them toward socialism or even to some encompassing welfare state. Instead, they favored forms of state intervention that would complement the market and increase the capacity of the working classes to participate in it.

The issue of moral character, Himmelfarb shows, was the overriding concern of the Victorian reformers. Their social policy was based upon the need to create the material and cultural conditions conducive to "respectability": the pedestrian virtues of "responsibility, decency, industriousness, prudence and temperance." In late Victorian England, these assumptions were shared by conservatives, liberals, and radicals.

THE GENERATION of New Left historians was inclined to dismiss the inculcation of these virtues as a means of "social control"-a hegemonic device practiced by the ruling class on the subordinate classes. Commenting upon the implications of the "social control" thesis, Himmelfarb asks, "If thrift, prudence, sobriety, industry, cleanliness, and independence were middle-class values, is it to be assumed that profligacy, imprudence, drunkenness, idleness, dirtiness, and dependency were indigenous working-class values?" Those who favor the "social control" thesis, she notes, may be "attributing to the poor a contempt for 'bourgeois' culture more congenial to intellectuals than to workers aspiring to that culture and to the material and social benefits associated with it."

Recent historical writing on Victorian England has shown that the struggle for respectability was central to the self-understanding of many of those in the working class, who stressed the distinction between the "rough" and the "respectable." As Himmelfarb demonstrates in her illuminating discussion of the London Dockers' Strike of 1889, it was precisely the respectable behavior of the workers that won them support from parts of the middle class and from religious leaders such as Cardinal Manning.

While some late Victorian reformers regarded moral character as a necessary prerequisite of the economic improvement of the working class in a reformed capitalism, others stressed that material improvements were not ends in themselves but prerequisites for moral development. The theme of moral development was central to the anglicized Hegelianism of T. H. Green, an influential figure in the transformation of late Victorian liberalism. Green broke with both laissez-faire liberalism and with the radical individualist liberalism of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty.* Mill had judged that "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant." Green, by contrast, emphasized the positive moral role of the state. "It is the business of the law to make virtue easy, and to make vice difficult," he asserted.

Green's student, Arnold Toynbee, led a cohort of young men from Oxbridge to the London slums to bring the fruits of higher education to the poor. "No one wants higher wages in order that working men may indulge in mere sensual gratification," Toynbee declared. "We want higher wages in order that an improved material condition, with less of anxiety and less uncertainty as to the future, may enable the working man to enter on a purer and more worthy life."

As Himmelfarb demonstrates through her careful analysis of the works of Booth, Marshall, Toynbee, and others, their reformism entailed state intervention for the sake of "limited, pragmatic, expediential purposes" while remaining fundamentally devoted to the market and to the self-help which the pedestrian virtues made possible. While social reform through state intervention (indeed any departure from strict laissez-faire) was often termed "socialism," Himmelfarb shows that these intellectuals were skeptical of the plausibility of socialism in the modern sense of a planned economy or government ownership of the means of production. Indeed, reforming Conservatives such as A.J. Balfour protested that social reform was not only distinct from socialism, it was "its most direct opposite and its most effective antidote."

HIMMELFARB emphasizes the role of the Fabian intellectuals Sidney and Beatrice Webb in the transformation of social reform into illiberal socialism, based upon a more dominant and encompassing role for government. The greatest appeal of this doctrine was among the "bourgeois, bureaucratic, and benevolent" middle class, who were skeptical of the pedestrian virtues of the masses and more likely to place their faith in (their own) disinterested expertise. As leaders and spokesmen of this class, the Fabians contributed to the rise of a welfare state which provided benefits regardless of merit or even need, and which divorced questions of social policy from those of character. But this transformation was by no means the work of the Fabians alone, and indeed it came about despite some of the residual Victorianism of the Webbs. They privately opposed the national insurance schemes for granting entitlements without any corresponding obligations, and sought to retain the link between benefits and moral desert that was later abandoned by the welfare state.

As Himmelfarb shows with great subtlety, the search for more "objective" and mathematically precise indices of poverty led to the abandonment of criteria of character in empirical studies of poverty. If the late Victorians like Booth recognized that "poverty" and "unemployment" had objective, structural causes not always reducible to the habits and character of the poor or unemployed, their successors increasingly ignored the role of character amid the arithmetic of social woe. By the early twentieth century, New Liberals felt increasingly uncomfortable "mixing up moralities and mathematics," as one then counted among their number, Winston Churchill, put it. It would be left to much later policy analysts to rediscover the inseparability of the moral and material dimensions of the problems of poverty.

The definition and extent of the "underclass" is central to the contemporary debate on poverty, and among the many questions that this volume illuminates is the intellectual antecedents of the idea of the "underclass." In a variety of formulations (and with changing meanings), those who have sought to conceptualize the problem of poverty have distinguished between the "respectable," "deserving," or "helpable" poor who worked regularly-or at least sought work regularly-and that smaller portion who did not share the ethos of respectability, and who were a drain on the resources of society and even a threat to the safety of others.

How to deal with such people in a liberal polity has been a recurrent dilemma. Such a society depends on the functioning of a variety of nongovernmental institutions to instill the inclinations and habits that make participation in the market possible: how should it treat those who lack such an institutional structure, or for whom such institutions have failed to produce the needed results?

CHARLES BOOTH was one among many who faced this difficulty. He focused his concern on that majority of the poor which was "deserving" and "labouring." But he classified 7.5 percent of the London population as a class of very poor, a "deposit of those who from mental, moral, and physical reasons are incapable of better work." These he proposed to evacuate from urban slums to industrial villages, where they would be well-housed, well-fed, and taught, trained, and employed on government-sponsored projects. Those who accepted State financial relief, he believed, should come under "State tutelage." Repugnant as such a notion was to a man of liberal inclinations, he thought it necessary for the sake of the working classes as a whole.

Such schemes of government-provided and government-enforced labor, often in villages removed from the negative social settings of urban slums, were suggested throughout the period, Himmelfarb notes, by a variety of authors-liberal, socialist, and religious. The Webbs recommended Detention Colonies for those recalcitrant workers or idlers whose "morbid state of mind" prevented them from being useful parts of the industrial order.

We are told almost nothing about why so few of these schemes were implemented, or about the reasons for their failure. At a time when ideas of state employment accompanied by some degree of state tutelage are again being touted as solutions to the problems of the underclass, it would be worthwhile to examine the fate of these earlier experiments. In any case, the problem of how a liberal society ought to deal with those who refuse to participate in the market remains as vexing as ever.

It is characteristic of an ideological work of history that it presents such facts-and only such facts-as lead inevitably to its author's own conclusions. Miss Himmelfarb's two volumes on the problem of poverty, while originally motivated by contemporary questions, lead us not to inevitable answers, but to better-informed questions. "The Victorians," Himmelfarb concludes, "have no solutions to our problems, if only because their problems are not ours." Like its predecessor, *The Idea of Poverty,* Himmelfarb's new book will disappoint readers expecting an ideological tract for the times. It is Miss Himmelfarb's readable yet rigorous recapturing of the complexity of past historical debates on issues of public policy that gives these books a value beyond the ideological postures of the day.

In *Poverty and Compassion,* Gertrude Himmelfarb's historical imagination meets the moral imagination of late Victorians, and her readers are the richer for it. We return to the present to find that intellectual travel has indeed broadened our own mind, and perhaps called our assumptions into question.

JERRY Z. MULLER *is Associate Professor of History at the Catholic University of America.*