La prison des pauvres: l'expérience des workhouses en Angleterre

Review Number: 2234

Publish date: Thursday, 12 April, 2018

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ISBN: 9782363582027

Date of Publication: 2016

Price: £20.00

Pages: 544pp.

Publisher: Editions Vendémiaire

Publisher url: <http://www.editions-vendemiaire.com/catalogue/collection-chroniques/la-prison-des-pauvres-jacques>

Place of Publication: Paris

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In an age where the welfare state, the social jewel in Britain's post-war crown, seems to be at breaking point, Jacques Carré's latest book, *La prison des pauvres : l'expérience des workhouses en Angleterre* (*The Pauper's Prison: The Experience of Workhouses in England*), is a timely reminder that public welfare in Britain has a long and complicated history. The origins of what has, via evolutions such as the New Poor Law of 1834, the multiple social reforms of the early 1900s, and the Beveridge Report of the 1940s, become our current system, can be traced as far back as the Poor Laws of 1597–1601 at the end of the Tudor era (p. 30). Today's welfare system is simultaneously held dear and much maligned by the British public, and a whole host of commentators dealing with contemporary inequality (e.g. Owen Jones, Danny Dorling, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett etc.) have gained impressive traction amongst the general readers.

Carré's book crucially affords a longer-term conception of England's pioneering, though often flawed, welfare provision – a long-termism often lacking in more contemporary accounts, yet vital if one is to truly understand the key themes that have spanned thinking on welfare provision for over 400 years. During that time, from the initial imposing of conditions on obtaining and dispensing welfare (p. 23), poverty has evolved from being considered the 'normal state' of the majority of the population to something nominally touching only an unfortunate minority (p. 17). Nonetheless, in a society dominated by debates on inequalities, the quotation picked out at the beginning of this review rings true from the book's opening chapter: when reading Carré's analysis of the origins of government-sponsored welfare, one could be forgiven at times for thinking that he is actually talking about the 20th or 21st centuries.

The examples of this abound. For instance, the attitudes towards welfare of governments since Margaret Thatcher's premiership have fuelled a popular conception of 'workers' versus 'shirkers' that mirrors the differentiation between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor at the heart of the Victorian conception of the workhouse, a distinction visible even in mid-16th century society (pp.17–27). Following the Reform, able-bodied unemployed men were often dismissed as simply 'lazy', regardless of the state of the jobs market, and falling on hard times was considered the result of 'negligence, debauchery, or [...] weakness of character' (p. 18). Whilst some saw the establishment of workhouses as the solution to this nefarious 'idleness' (p. 55), others merely saw them as a way of perpetuating it (p. 60). The distinction between deserving and undeserving poor would even become apparent in the internal organisation of the workhouse, initially in

London (pp. 49, 94). Exaggerated criticisms of the cost of running workhouses were strikingly similar to modern-day complaints about the cost of funding benefits (p. 47).

In addition, the founding principle of the workhouse system – St. Paul's declaration that 'he who does not work, neither shall he eat' (p. 9) – is reflected in the present-day conception of welfare as *workfare* (1) that treats assistance as a top-up to waged labour. The 17th-century notion that it was through work that paupers could 'return to the economic circuit' (p. 12), so abruptly inverted by the New Poor Law that saw workhouse labour as 'essentially punitive' (p. 13), would find its echo in Tony Blair's belief that 'every person liberated to fulfil their potential adds to our wealth'. (2) As Carré points out, a linking of population, work, and national wealth was commonplace amongst 17th-century thinkers such as William Petty, Gregory King, Charles Davenant, Josiah Child or Dudley North (p. 27).

Recipients of welfare, meanwhile, were from the outset generally depicted as a 'man, a head of the household supposed to be looking after a wife and children who did not work' (p. 18), an erroneous conception later mirrored in the post-war legislation inspired by the Beveridge Report, as well as more recent policies, such as those introduced by Blair as part of his 'New Deal' initiatives at the turn of the millennium. Carré does nuance, however, that many early workhouses emphasised textile-based labour which, in his view, suggests workhouse owners were expecting mainly women and children (p. 34). He then comments that this might have been more to do with workhouses being a new phenomenon: the owners would have wanted to initially cater for social groups deemed easier to manage so as to gain the workhouse a better reputation amongst a population that was, we have already noted, divided on their worth (p. 59). Though seemingly in contradiction with his affirmation on page 18, Carré's analysis makes sense when one remembers that, particularly in their early days, workhouses were often at least partially privately financed and so it was necessary to make them attractive not only to public opinion but also to potential backers (p. 93).

Jacques Carré is professor emeritus of British studies at the Sorbonne in Paris, specialising in British cultural and social history in the 18th and 19th centuries. In a career during which he has published widely, he has previously penned other works on poverty in Britain, notably: *Écrire la pauvreté : les enquêtes sociales britanniques aux XIXe et XXe siècles* (1995) and *Les visiteurs du pauvre, Anthologie d'enquêtes britanniques sur la pauvreté urbaine (XIXe-XXe siècles)* (2000). (3) *La prison des pauvres* was very well received by French critics, who lauded its chronological scope (from Elizabethan England to the eve of the Second World War) and geographical spread (England as a whole, supplemented by local case studies of diverse places including St. Giles-in-the-Fields, Bristol, Manchester, Shrewsbury, Bulcamp, Poplar, and Chell), welcoming it as a key text in the historiography on British society. It was, amongst other things, compared very favourably to major English-language works on poor relief such as Ethel Mary Hampson's *The Treatment of Poverty in Cambridgeshire* (1934) or Anne Digby's *Pauper Palaces* (1978). (4)

Carré's book is a weighty tome, the main body alone coming in at just under 470 pages. Not only is it well-researched in terms of both primary sources and secondary literature – as the 16 pages of bibliography attest – but it is also well-presented with 30 pages of footnotes, a glossary of key terms, two indexes (one for names, one for places), and a detailed table of contents listing both chapter and sub-chapter headings. Within the main body of the text, Carré very often uses the original English terminology, either accompanied with a translation where appropriate (e.g. 'able-bodied' ('*sains de corps*') or 'sturdy beggars' ('*mendiants vigoureux*') (p. 20)), or in lieu of a French word where an exact translation does not exist. The reader's experience of the text – and their potential desire to pursue the subject further – has clearly been factored into the book's production, something one feels is particularly important for a Francophone audience less familiar with the workhouse as a concept, but which would no doubt be very useful for English readers too, many of whom will associate workhouses mainly with Charles Dickens' descriptions in *Oliver Twist* (p. 7).

Both the book's cover and its title are striking. Carré's use of the word 'prison', however, should be seen neither as sensationalism – even if popular conception in Britain does tend to imagine workhouses in such a light (p. 474) – nor as belying the subtlety of his argument; indeed, Carré reminds the reader from the very

start that workhouses were not, in fact, prisons (p. 7). The cover image, of mealtime in the Marylebone workhouse at the turn of the 20th century, is both haunting and sad. The high ceiling and bare brick walls that surround the seemingly endless rows of black-uniformed, mainly aged men, shoulders slumped and eyes cast down at the meagre plates of food in front of them, is suggestive of the absurdity of the Victorian workhouse but also a reminder that, for all its flaws, the workhouse was the only thing keeping many of its inhabitants alive (pp. 472–3).

Carré's argument is divided into four broad sections – 'Reducing the disorder; Workhouses and social utopia; The punitive workhouse; and Include or exclude?' – and both these sections and the chapters within them, whilst thematic, are broadly chronological. Starting in the age of Elizabeth I, Carré follows the genesis and evolution of the workhouse right up until their decline and disappearance in the first half of the 20th century. Across the book, Carré seeks to address three key points: the workhouse 'community', the use of space and architecture in the workhouse, and the function of the work undertaken by inmates (pp. 11–14). As the book's subtitle indicates, Carré ultimately aims to reconstruct the 'experience' of workhouses and poor relief, a task made very difficult by the sheer lack of sources written from the point-of-view of the inmates themselves (p. 9). Even more official sources are at times, unfortunately, unobtainable, as is the case with the archives of the Bristol workhouses at The Mint and Whitehall, which were largely destroyed following their closure (p. 65) – and even those which are available are not necessarily accurate. For instance, though several accounts detail menus for workhouse inhabitants, it is hard to know how far these suggestions were followed in reality as there exist few records of what food was actually purchased (p. 77). Carré, luckily, is under no illusions about the many grey areas that remain (p. 100).

Indeed, Carré succeeds through his case studies and his thorough use of a wide range of primary sources (workhouse codes of conduct, accounts of riots, articles by economists, appeals by philanthropists and socialists, laws etc.) in painting a fairly full picture of welfare provision not only in workhouses but in other institutions such as bridewells, almshouses, hospitals, and labour colonies (e.g. pp. 36–41, 101–15, 423–46). Where possible, Carré uses effectively and extensively the few available first-hand testimonies of life inside the workhouse, such as that of Charles Shaw in the Chell workhouse (pp. 311–18). His use of primary sources, meanwhile, is most visible in his detailed case studies in which he makes the various sources interact with one another such that the reader gets a sense of the arguments both for and against workhouses, as well as more factual details about their objectives and their day-to-day running (e.g. pp. 56–64). Carré still, however, feels compelled to admit in his conclusion that the lack of first-hand accounts constitutes a 'blind spot' in his analysis, bemoaning that the voices of workhouse inmates remains 'desperately silent', with only 'distant echoes' and 'rumours' giving modern readers a window into this alien world (p. 475).

Alas, this is an all too common barrier for social history. In the case of workhouses, not only were the majority of inmates illiterate, but a consequence of entering the workhouse was losing one's sense of self: particularly as of the 1800s, a pauper receiving assistance not only had nothing but also was nothing (p. 10). As the historian Charles Forman once lamented, the masses are 'the object of records, not the subject' (5), and despite workhouses promising to promote 'the instruction of youth, the encouragement of industry, the relief of want, the support of old age, and the comfort of infirmity and pain' (6), those individuals who found themselves constrained to enter the workhouse were very much objects of poor relief, not subjects. This notion of object over subject was particularly evident following the implementation of the New Poor Law in 1834, after which point paupers receiving assistance were 'objectively not worthy of the name citizens, as they had put themselves in a position of dependence', so their social exclusion was of their own making (p. 451). Once more, the ramifications of Carré's work for current debates are visible, this time concerning the contentious issue of whether being poor is for some a life choice rather than a misfortune.

This shortage of first-hand accounts – which Carré can do little about and which, by introducing a new audience to the subject and so potentially alerting other researchers to the need to comb the archives for first-hand testimonies on workhouse life, his work may help rectify – is a rare blot on an otherwise impressive copybook. It has been noted that Carré does not make as much as he otherwise might of the ideas of Michel Foucault or of Erving Goffman's notion of total institutions (7), though this is arguably no bad thing. Carré

does, in fact, cite both Foucault and Goffman (e.g. pp. 21, 89, 193, 239, 470, 474), but refrains from becoming too abstract in his analysis, a sensible choice in a book at whose heart is the concrete experience of workhouse life and which allows his work to be read both by scholars and the general reader (p. 17). It would have been a shame to confuse a clear and eloquent writing style – which should present little difficulty to an English reader with a good grounding in French – with dense philosophical digressions. Thanks to Carré's thorough footnotes and bibliography, the curious reader is free to dig such ideas more deeply if they are so minded. One disappointment, however, is that in his chapter on the end of the workhouse (pp.447–68), Carré does not write about how the changes in legislation regarding workhouses, pensions, or national insurance were received by those these policies were designed to help. Whilst he does give much detail on the opinions of politicians and lobbies such as the Charity Organisation Society, there is, by comparison with the rest of the book, very scant information about press or popular feeling towards these important changes in political attitudes, now seen as constituting huge strides towards what has become the modern welfare state.

That said, these quibbles should not detract from the book's overall quality. Carré's book should be read by anyone with an interest in British social history. In addition to the reasons outlined above, his book is a fine example of foreign-language scholarship on British society and history. Carré, like other foreign scholars, has the benefit of being an outside observer, the product of a different cultural and academic system to native British scholars, a fact which allows at the very least for a different point-of-view and appreciation of the topic. It is a source of regret that, unless an English-language translation is produced, this book will be unlikely to reach a wide readership amongst either the general public or academics.

Notes

1. Jacques Rodriguez, 'Revue' <<http://www.lemouvementsocial.net/comptes-rendus/jacques-carre-prison-pauvres-lexperience-workhouses-angleterre/> [2]> [accessed 7 February 2018].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Speech at 1999 Labour Party Conference <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/1999/sep/28/labourconference.labour14> [3]> [accessed 7 February 2018].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Jacques Carré, *Écrire la pauvreté : les enquêtes sociales britanniques aux XIXe et XXe siècles* (Paris, 1995); *Les visiteurs du pauvre, Anthologie d'enquêtes britanniques sur la pauvreté urbaine (XIXe-XXe siècles)* (Paris, 2000).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Laurence Dubois, 'Revue', *Etudes Anglaises*, 70, 1 (2017); Tri Tran, 'Jacques Carré, *La Prison des pauvres. L'Expérience des workhouses en Angleterre*', *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens [en ligne]*, 85 (Printemps 2017); Corinne M. Belliard, 'Compte rendu de *La prison des pauvres : l'Expérience des workhouses en Angleterre*', *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique [en ligne]*, 21, 2 (2016).
[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Charles Forman, *Industrial Town: Self-Portrait of St Helens in the 1920s*, (London, 1979), p. 22.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Cited in: Anne Digby, *Pauper Palaces*, (London, 1978), p. 2.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Jacques Rodriguez, *op. cit.* [Back to \(7\)](#)

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[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/1999/sep/28/labourconference.labour14>

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