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JOHN VEIT-WILSON'S BOOK REVIEWS.

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IAN GAZELEY [2003], *POVERTY IN BRITAIN, 1900 – 1965*,
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, BASINGSTOKE.

The period this book addresses saw major changes both in British society and in conventional ideas of what British poverty was. Just as the nature of poverty changed, so the perception of what was intolerable also changed. This leads to the paradox which some still find incomprehensible, that even at higher material levels of living it was possible for poverty to persist in both extent and intensity, and for the same structural reasons (inadequate wages and benefits) at the end of that period as at the start. Statistical 'facts' alone cannot explain this: only epistemological analysis of changing paradigms and experiences can do so. But this book is written from the perspective of economic history. It offers a mass of contemporary statistics on social conditions such as employment and wages in the labour market, demography, consumer prices and nutrition, drawn from many sources, reworking the primary material when relevant, to illuminate the issues around material deprivations. The seven chapters open with the Victorian legacy, then consider evidence of the nature and causes (meaning structural correlates) of poverty during the first and second twenty years of the century, the relationship between unemployment and poverty between the wars, the 1940s, and the final fifteen years.

The book's treatment of poverty is in terms of whatever contemporary social researchers said it was. It reviews the many statistical surveys of poverty which followed Rowntree for four decades, all of which used as their defining measure some amended version of his original minimum subsistence budget. It distinguishes them in detail, drawing close attention to the comparisons of each constituent of the priced elements, in particular the scientifically developing ideas of proper nutrition and its costs, as well as to the problems of equivalence scales. It emphasises the differences which changes in the composition and cash value of these aspects made to the poverty counts based on the aggregated measures.

The book is useful as an economic history account of social conditions and a summary of contemporary poverty counts, but it is not a history of ideas about poverty. It treats disparate approaches to conceptualising poverty as if they were comparable variants on a single dimensional scale. What and how much poverty there was is a problematic question of differential perspectives, and cannot be answered by the use of minimum subsistence budgets, however sophisticated. They measured only what middle class elites thought poor people ought to be able to live on to achieve nothing more than physical subsistence, and ignored what ordinary people needed in order to take a minimally decent part in society according to its own standards at that time. Rowntree's own explanation that his primary poverty measure was deliberately asocial for heuristic reasons is curiously ascribed to me (whereas I merely reported it¹), yet it is crucial to distinguishing conflicting perspectives on poverty. The influential statistician Bowley, too, recognised that larger incomes might be needed to avoid poverty than were embodied in his widely used 'poverty' measures.² The nearest anyone got to counting the numbers in socially defined poverty in this period was when Booth and then Rowntree counted the numbers visibly living in want and squalor in the 1890s; it did not reappear until the publication of Townsend's *Poverty in the United Kingdom* in 1979.

¹ Rowntree's explanations are quoted in my 1986 paper 'Paradigms of Poverty', *Journal of Social Policy*, 15/1, pp 83-86.

² A. L. Bowley and M. H. Hogg (1925), *Has Poverty Diminished?*, London: King, pp 13-14.

There are similar unanswered epistemological problems in the book's comparisons between the asocial minimum subsistence budgets and Rowntree's attempts at a living wage budget, his *Human Needs of Labour* prescriptions (1918 and 1937), as well as with the Beveridge constructs in 1942. It is doubtful if the variety of incompatible measures, none of which were based on evidence of the income boundary between poverty and adequacy, still less the details of Beveridge's proposed scales which at the time were admitted to be no more than rationalisations of less-eligibility³, justify the book's extensive and highly detailed quantitative calculations.

What the quoted surveys show is that during this period millions of people lived on incomes insufficient even for physical subsistence. Millions more were living socially and physically stunted lives, but we cannot know exactly how many because the methodological tools were blunted by the elite's limited perception of poverty at that time, and its confusion between conceptualising and measuring poverty on the one hand and of financing residual income maintenance on the other. Some contemporary experts did comment on this confusion, and the book could have made more of their insights.⁴ There are also some unfortunate typos, including repeatedly naming the redoubtable Dr M'Gonigle as M'Gongile, and the Whitley as Whitely Councils.

Readers who are not as critical as I am about what definition or measure of poverty is being used may find this a useful book. Sociologists of poverty may wonder if the book's conclusions about changes in poverty rates would have been different if empirical methods had been available instead of the asocial normative methods so fully and statistically reported here. As John Clare's biographer recently wrote, commenting on the effect of the Enclosures, "What matters to individual lives is personal experience, not economic statistics".⁵ Perhaps that is the key distinction between the approaches of economic history and of sociology to reporting on poverty.

³ The Beveridge working papers are quoted in my 1992 paper 'Muddle or mendacity', *Journal of Social Policy*, 21/3, pp 287-289.

⁴ For instance, B. Woolf (1946), 'Poverty Lines and Standards of Living', *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, 5, pp 71-84.

⁵ Jonathan Bate, quoted in *Guardian Review* 10 October 2003 p 9.