INDEPENDENT DISCOVERY, UNCONSCIOUS PLAGIARISM, OR MY ‘BOOK OF THE YEAR’.

B Woolf [1946], “Poverty Lines and Standards of Living”,
Thirty-second Scientific Meeting: ‘The Role of Nutrition in Social Medicine’,
2 March 1946, Proceedings of the Nutrition Society volume 5, nos 1 and 2, pp 71-84.

My book of the year would have been the DWP’s Final Report on Measuring Child Poverty
[December 2003] because it beautifully exemplifies the persistent failure to distinguish between the
Humpty-Dumpty prescription of a word’s meaning (they can measure what they choose to call
poverty however they want), and the empirical enquiry needed to satisfy the public that what the
public itself perceives and experiences as poverty has been reduced or abolished. But the reading
which struck me most was a 58-year-old paper, scholarly, critical and incisive, which is even more
relevant to today’s poverty measurement arguments.

I had never heard of its author before the US historian of poverty measures, Gordon M Fisher,
recommended the paper, and it was a year before I got it from the library. Reading it was worse than
déjà vu: it showed that when I was researching the papers of Rowntree and Beveridge in the 1980s, I
had come unaware to conclusions like those which a Dr B Woolf had reached four decades earlier.
(Edinburgh University, where he worked in social medicine, records him as Dr B A Wolf – does
anyone know?)

If independent discovery and coincidence could be plagiarism, it was totally unconscious. When I was
writing about the abuses of Rowntree’s views on poverty, it didn’t occur to me to search apparently
unrelated society proceedings. Had I seen the paper’s title I should undoubtedly have read it, but there
were no computerised search methods at that time. I was struck how for political reasons Rowntree’s
heuristic minima had been turned into maximum incomes, and said so in New Society in 1983, not
knowing that Woolf had used an almost identical expression. Similarly, I thought my use in 1992 of
food share methods to analyse the (in)adequacy of Beveridge’s benefit levels compared with
Rowntree’s Human Needs recommendations was original, but Woolf had already used them and come
to the same conclusion, that while the gross figures were similar (which still wrongly leads some to
think they are based on the same calculations), Beveridge’s allowances for non-food expenditures
were unrealistically low (to retain less-eligibility).

Woolf’s current relevance is his insistence that such prescriptive budget methods can never determine
whether, for instance, good health will be achieved at some minimum dietary cost. He noted the
oppression of blaming victims for failing to achieve prescribed standards on inadequate incomes, and
insisted “The only safe way …[is] … to find out what people actually buy, and at what income level
the diet reaches the postulated nutritional standards”. Whether we are trying to measure the minimum
income needed for nutrition, health or any other aspect of social participation, this is what John Boyd Orr recommended in 1936; what Peter Townsend repeated in 1954; and what the Blair government steadfastly refuses to consider, even though it has the data and the methods needed.

Finally, Woolf even quoted the ILO’s tiered distinction of income maintenance between subsistence, decency and comfort and drew parallels with the income maintenance system: minimum wage rates should offer decency, not mere subsistence. His conclusion is as relevant today as half a century ago – “…it would … be wrong and harmful to let [benefit rates] be accepted without critical and authoritative examination as scientific measures of optimum human needs”.