

HOW IMPORTANT WERE FORMALIZED CHARITY AND SOCIAL SPENDING BEFORE THE RISE OF THE WELFARE STATE? A LONG-RUN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED WESTERN EUROPEAN CASES, 1400-1850¹

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Even more so than today, social spending before the 19th century could play a vital role in protecting people from the vagaries of life. Besides generally low levels of income, pre-industrial societies were also marked by relatively great inequality, and their food markets had high price volatility, exposing many people to destitution and famine.² Was social spending in this period able to mitigate these problems, or did it only take off later in developed, wealthier countries?

Given the importance of this issue, interest in the history of poor relief and charitable organisations in the pre-industrial period has produced many historical studies. Some of these have, for instance, placed poor relief in its wider, social context or in the perspective of the development of labour markets and capitalism, or have linked it to changing patterns of mortality.³ However, because of the fragmented and highly diverse nature of social assistance and the absence of statistical sources before the second half of the 19th century, most studies remain very descriptive or focus on specific cases only and lack a comparative aspect.⁴

Peter Lindert's investigations on social spending since c. 1780 are an exception.⁵ His studies on the late 18th and 19th centuries are mainly focused on England, which is blessed with relatively abundant source material, especially the Poor Law Commission's reports. These allow Lindert to quantify relief at the national level. Focusing on state expenditures, with some supplementary information on charities, he is able to make geographical comparisons and identify shifts over time, especially in the period around 1800 to the emergence of welfare states. One of his main observations is that social assistance before the late 19th century was very limited. England and the Netherlands stood out, but even here relief did not amount to more than a few per cent of GDP. In the rest of Europe this percentage would be less than 1 per cent. Other studies, for instance by Abram de Swaan, convey a similar picture. He characterises social welfare in the late

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² Milanovic, Lindert, and Williamson, 'Pre-industrial inequality'.

³ E.g., Mollat, *Études*; Lis and Soly, *Poverty and capitalism*; Boyer, 'Poor Law'; Solar, 'Poor relief' and recently Kelly and Ó Gráda, 'Poor law'.

⁴ King, 'Welfare regimes', p. 44.

⁵ Lindert, 'Poor relief'; Lindert, *Growing Public*.

medieval and early modern period as fragile and unstable.⁶ This would mean that social spending only recently became substantial, as societies had become much wealthier, and that it was least generous where it was needed most – termed the Robin Hood paradox by Peter Lindert.⁷

Despite these efforts no genuinely long-run quantitative analysis of social spending exists. Was social spending really universally low before the welfare state? Were there changes and discontinuities in the long run? Lindert shows the rise of government expenditure in England developing from 1 % in the mid-18th century to 2.7 % in 1820 and back again to 1.1 % around 1840. This already indicates that changes could be substantial and patterns found around 1800 cannot be easily generalised.

Moreover, we are not sure about the driving forces behind levels of social assistance. Did rising levels of income automatically translate into a higher share spent on social assistance? Another influence on the level of social spending, according to Lindert, is broad access to political power. He holds access to political decision-making in the period c.1750–1900 responsible for the changes in English social spending. Stuart Woolf and, again, Peter Lindert also suggest that religious factors played a role, with Protestant countries spending more on relief. Social assistance on average seems to have been much lower in Catholic countries, as indicated by levels of less than 1 per cent in France and Italy in the 19th century.⁸ These claims, however, should be supported by strong evidence, encompassing a long time period and a variety of societies in terms of income, politics, and religion.

This article addresses these lacunae. It places the experiences of the 19th century in a long-run perspective and uses a selection of cases to identify geographical differences and divergences within Europe. Next, it uses this overview to discuss the causes underlying the long-run patterns and geographical differences.

In order to do so, we need estimates on social spending for the period from the late Middle Ages to 1800. These are difficult to make because the organisation of poor relief in this period was highly fragmented. Across Europe, there was a wide range of local customs as well as hundreds of thousands of organisations involved in poor relief. Most were privately funded and governed, making the source material highly diverse and dispersed. As a result, much research for the period before the 18th century consists of case-studies of single organisations or, at best, individual towns. Even investigations looking at charity at city level often have to focus on a single charitable institution. An example is the important study by James Henderson on charity in late medieval

⁶ De Swaan, *In Care of the State*, pp. 6-7 and 21-51.

⁷ Lindert, *Growing public*, p. 15.

⁸ Stuart Woolf, *Poor*, p. 33; Lindert, *Growing public*, p. 44.

Florence, which is focused on the fraternity of Orsanmichele, only one of the dozens of charitable fraternities and hospitals in Florence – albeit the most important one.⁹

The fragmentation and descriptive nature of many studies obstruct long-run analyses and comparisons. Moreover, a focus on impressive cases risks overestimating public assistance in this period. The large funds, the large numbers of poor relieved, the masses of food and drink distributed, and the grand buildings of the big hospitals and other charitable organisations can seem impressive.¹⁰ Conversely, there is the risk of underestimation of public assistance when the figures for single organisations are implicitly taken as an indication of total support in a locality, when they formed only one of a large number of organisations there. The result is that the importance of poor relief in the pre-industrial period is assessed very differently in the literature, from very positive and important – especially in the older, religiously inspired literature – to negative, unimportant and inadequate.¹¹ The true importance of relief is difficult to know because only few general overviews and estimates of total sums exist.

After we give an overview of the organisation of social spending and its development in section I, we will make a big step forward by estimating total social assistance in the period 1400–1850, that is, including the period hardly documented in surveys so far (section II). We will do so for three cases: the centre-north of Italy, the Netherlands and England. These three cases figure prominently in the literature on poor relief, and they display different patterns of economic growth and of socio-political and religious change, allowing us to assess various possible causes.

This investigation of social spending includes formal assistance offered by public authorities (local, cities, national), by religious institutions (parishes, monasteries, chapters), by charitable institutions (hospitals, almshouses, private foundations) and where possible also that by associations (village communities, commons, fraternities). We focus on relief by institutions, but other formal entitlements of the poor will also be discussed and, as far as possible, provided with quantitative statements. Also included, but only tentatively, is relief stipulated in wills. We exclude informal, direct assistance by family, kin, neighbours and friends, direct alms, and *ad hoc* collections. Insufficient sources exist on informal assistance to assess its importance prior to the 19th century. Also disregarded are the indirect redistributive effects of government policies such as taxation. Their effects were sooner regressive rather than progressive, as revenues came mostly from excises on consumption goods that weighed disproportionately on the poor, while public

⁹ Henderson, *Piety and Charity*, pp. 252ff.

¹⁰ Discussed in Geremek, *Poverty*, pp. 22–3, 37–9; or for Venetian hospitals: Aikema and Meijers, *Regno dei poveri*.

¹¹ The negative view in Hufton, *Poor*, pp. 173–176.

expenses benefited already well-off government officials and bondholders.¹² We have also chosen to omit subsidies for education and insurance schemes (e.g. for sickness or burial). The latter, when they existed, were mostly organised in a guild structure, and they were predominantly aimed at the middle classes who held guild membership and could afford to pay the contributions, not at the poor.¹³

After identifying the main patterns of total social assistance in the period 1400-1850, we will further explore regional variations and place them in a wider geographical perspective (section III). Next, we will discuss the causes of the differences in the scope of public assistance (section IV). Conclusions follow.

I

In the Middle Ages a very diverse patchwork of poor relief had emerged and the importance of social spending in this period can, therefore, only be assessed by including the full scope of all forms of relief. In the early and high Middle Ages, relief by kin and neighbours was an important part of the safety net. Institutionalised poor relief was principally provided by religious and semi-religious institutions such as monasteries and parish funds. The introduction and formalisation of tithing also offered a form of poor relief, since at least in theory one-fourth to one-third of the tithe was destined for the poor of the parish, although it is questionable whether this happened in practice.¹⁴

In the wave of horizontal association and community formation in the 11th to 13th centuries, new charitable organisations emerged, mostly managed by laymen. This was a formative period of institutionalised poor relief, sometimes labelled “a revolution of charity”.¹⁵ In the villages and parishes of the countryside, people organised poor boxes, and the formalisation of commons and other organisations of communal agriculture often offered the poor some access to land or its fruits. Village by-laws in regions all over Western Europe, in England at least from the 13th century on, formalised the right of the rural poor to forage on the common wastelands, to graze one or two animals on the common meadows, or to reap the leftovers or fallen grain after the harvest.¹⁶ The latter practice, called gleaning, was important in grain-growing areas where

¹² De Vries and Van der Woude, *First modern economy*, pp. 100ff on the Dutch Republic.

¹³ Van Leeuwen, ‘Guilds’; Gelderblom and Jonker, ‘With a view’ on the Netherlands; Bos, *Onderlinge hulpverlening*, pp. 293-326 for an international perspective.

¹⁴ Arnoux, ‘Economie historique’; Boyd, *Tithes and parishes*, 78–80, 120-124.

¹⁵ Mollat, *Pauvres au Moyen Age*, pp. 165-187 (for this label: p. 165); De Moor, ‘Silent revolution’.

¹⁶ King, ‘Gleaners, farmers’, 139, 141–2; Ault, ‘By-laws’.

communal forms of agriculture and open fields were predominant. To the extent that these rights were not directly connected to landownership they should be considered as part of relief.

In the emerging towns, too, new forms of poor relief developed. Formal organisations for poor relief were developed as a vital element of urban community building.¹⁷ In the Low Countries and elsewhere poor tables emerged, often called tables of the Holy Spirit, aimed at distributions to the poor. Funding, sometimes large amounts of land but mainly annuities, was assembled by merchants and better-off craftsmen, but many donations also came from the middle strata of society.¹⁸ In many Italian cities, confraternities had taken on the responsibility of general poor relief since at least the 13th century. They took care of distributions and sometimes administered hospitals.¹⁹

Hospitals also emerged in the 12th and 13th centuries. Larger towns might have dozens of these institutions, which provided the needy with shelter and food, and made distributions to the poor.²⁰ It was mainly the urban elite who took the initiative in founding these institutions. Almshouses and orphanages were also founded by the hundred in the Netherlands from the late 14th century onwards.²¹ They, like the other institutions set up in this period often endured for centuries. In late-medieval England too, many almshouses providing free residence and a stipend to the poor were founded.²² Other sources of poor relief in medieval England were monasteries, hospitals and occasional poor rates. As on the continent, English medieval relief was fragmented.²³

In contrast to modern welfare arrangements, the role of public authorities was mainly limited to some degree of control over charities and hospitals, since they took virtually no part in financing poor relief. In Italy and in the Netherlands governments offered very little direct assistance.²⁴ In England, forerunners of the first poor rates financed through local taxation probably existed before the late 16th-century Poor Laws, but in many villages these were not yet systematically collected and only supplemented other forms of relief.²⁵

¹⁷ Lynch, *Individuals, families*, 5-18 and 103-110.

¹⁸ Maréchal, 'Armen- en ziekenzorg'; Tits-Dieuaide, 'Tables des pauvres', 559-561; Galvin, 'Credit'.

¹⁹ Terpstra, 'Apprenticeship'; Henderson, *Piety and charity*.

²⁰ Maréchal, 'Armen- en ziekenzorg'; Henderson, *Renaissance hospital*; McIntosh, *Poor relief*, pp. 69-93.

²¹ E.g. Looijensteijn, 'Funding and founding' on Leiden's 47 almshouses.

²² McIntosh, *Poor relief*, 69.

²³ McIntosh, *Poor relief*, 7-8; for a similar fragmentation in the early modern period, see Innes, "Mixed economy", 141-3.

²⁴ E.g. Haemers and Ryckbosh, 'Public services', pp. 222-223 on Flanders; Henderson, *Piety and charity*, p. 241 on Florence.

²⁵ Dyer, 'English medieval village', 415-416; Dyer, 'Poverty', pp. 45-48 for the fourteenth-century beginnings of poor rates, though McIntosh, *Poor relief*, 96ff argues that medieval parochial poor rates and poor boxes were rare outside the south of England.

The distributions made by relief organisations were largely financed out of the revenues from the assets they owned. A systematic sample of charitable and religious foundations in the late medieval Low Countries showed they obtained on average 70 per cent of their income from asset returns.²⁶ Other studies have uncovered similar funding patterns across the Continent in the pre-industrial period.²⁷ Direct donations and taxation played only a small role in the finance of poor relief in this period.

In addition to the aid offered by all these organisations, members of guilds and journeymen associations could also count on assistance, particularly if they were struck by the death, illness, or disability of the breadwinner or another family member. Sometimes guild members made regular contributions to a common fund to meet such expenses, as a form of mutual insurance.²⁸

All in all, poor relief was fragmented, and this fragmentation increased with the establishment of new organisations since the older forms of relief remained. Throughout the pre-industrial period, there were frequent attempts to counteract this fragmentation by reforming relief systems, albeit not always fundamentally. Around the middle of the 15th century, poor relief in many Italian towns was reorganised, often at the instigation of public authorities and urban elites. In towns like Cortona (1441), Prato (1429) and Bologna (1490–1530) smaller hospitals and other organisations were consolidated into bigger organisations.²⁹ This effort, aimed at increasing efficiency and also at enlarging the urban elites' grip on the administration, was not complete, however, and left many autonomous organisations.

Calls for reform of poor relief grew at the beginning of the 16th century, but now more generally all over Western Europe. The plans for reform were most clearly expressed by humanist writer Juan Luis Vives. He turned against the medieval tradition of alms-giving, charity and the sanctity of poverty, and proposed more pragmatic solutions to poverty instead. In the second quarter of the 16th century some of the reform ideas were realised in the Low Countries and Italy. To some extent, the reforms can be seen as rationalisation, with the merger of smaller funds and the introduction of central control, though in the Low Countries the funding and management of charity remained largely unchanged. At the same time, there were also changes in the aims of poor relief, including stricter exclusion of the non-deserving poor, especially foreigners, beggars and vagrants. Poor relief should offer a safety net, but it was increasingly also used as an instrument to

²⁶ Rijpma, 'Funding public services', 90–93.

²⁷ Early Modern Low Countries: Gelderblom and Jonker, 'With a view to hold', pp. 74, 79, 84; Italy: Henderson, *Piety and charity*, p. 172; Pullan, *Rich and poor*, 157–167; France: Fairchild, *Poverty*, p. 59.

²⁸ Van Leeuwen, 'Guilds'; Bos, *Onderlinge hulpverlening*, pp. 149–197 (an in-depth analysis for the city of Utrecht); Assante, 'Prophets of welfare'; Rappaport, *Worlds*, pp. 195–8.

²⁹ Perol, *Cortona*, pp. 171–174 and 184–188; Mollat, *Pauvres au Moyen Age*, pp. 339–344; Terpstra, 'Apprenticeship'.

prevent voluntary unemployment and begging, forcing all able-bodied people to work.³⁰ This was a reinforcement of existing practices as poor relief always focused on the so-called deserving poor: vulnerable groups such as orphans, foundlings, the aged, the impaired, and widows. Although they were most likely to be poor, in part the focus was also a reflection of social preferences regarding relief recipients.³¹

England had similar poor relief reforms in this period. Catholic organisations were seen to hand out doles indiscriminately. Parliament legislated on relief organised at the parish level which was targeted only at the deserving poor while strict laws against vagrancy were also enacted.³² Protestantism was by no means the only driver of these poor relief reforms. Catholic cities in Southern Europe also acted to suppress vagrancy and provide more systematic care for the deserving poor.³³ Also, even in the North many steps had already been taken before the real penetration of Protestant ideas.³⁴ In this sense, the 16th century was not a break with the past, but rather an acceleration, completion, and more systematic implementation of developments which had begun much earlier, particularly in the 12th-13th centuries.³⁵ These included the centralisation and rationalisation of charity, the role of laymen and the influence of public authorities, as well as measures against the undeserving poor.

Partly, at least in the Netherlands and England, these developments coincided with the Reformation, which affected the religious sources of poor relief. In the Netherlands the monasteries were secularised. Their properties were not dissolved, but brought under public administration and assigned to other purposes. Occasionally the new goal was social spending, for instance when assets of Amsterdam's Carthusian monastery ended up at the civic orphanage.³⁶ Furthermore, in the early modern period the different religious denominations in the Dutch Republic, from different types of Protestants to Catholics and Jews, each established their own poor relief organisations at the local level, which operated alongside to the hospitals, orphanages and relief agencies administered by the local public authorities.³⁷ These developments resulted in a mixed system of poor relief that endured well into the 19th century.³⁸

In England, the organisation of poor relief took a fundamentally different direction in the 16th century. The transformation in the financing and management of poor relief and charitable

³⁰ Geremek, *Poverty*, pp. 143ff; Lis and Soly, *Poverty and capitalim*, pp. 87–8, 194–214.

³¹ Blockmans and Prevenier, 'Armoede', p. 352; Fairchild, *Poverty*, pp. 73–4; Geremek, *Poverty*, pp. 25–6.

³² McIntosh, *Poor relief*, 115–138.

³³ Pullan, 'Catholics, Protestants', 450, 456; Jütte, *Poverty and deviance*, 100–105 for an overview of the debate.

³⁴ Parker, *Reformation*, 65–66 and 86–90; Van der Heijden, 'Vives'; Alves, 'Christian social organism'.

³⁵ Tierney, *Medieval poor law*, pp. 128–133; *Idem*, 'Decretist'.

³⁶ McCants, *Civic charity*, p. 157.

³⁷ Heerma van Voss and Van Leeuwen, 'Charity', pp. 176–177; Van Leeuwen, 'Philanthropy', p. 305.

³⁸ Heerma van Voss, 'Embarrassment of poverty'.

foundations had been much more radical there, especially in the 1530s and 1540s, as religious institutions, chantries and fraternities were dissolved.³⁹ Monastic properties were confiscated, as were about half of the hospitals and almshouses. Despite the creation of new foundations, the number of hospitals and almshouses around 1600 was only two-thirds of that before 1540.⁴⁰ Poor relief by hospitals and other foundations, however, came to be surpassed by the nation-wide public assistance organised by the state, using the parish as the basic unit of administration. After some precedents in the mid-16th century, or perhaps even earlier, from around 1600 poor relief funded by compulsory land taxes developed.⁴¹ The private charities and charitable foundations remained, but their relative importance declined as poor relief became increasingly tax-based. Even though a mixture of different welfare provisions remained in England, from a European perspective the degree to which the English state succeeded in enforcing a nation-wide tax-based system of poor relief was exceptional.⁴² The mixture of forms of formalised poor relief, and between public, semi-public or corporate and private organisation, therefore displayed clear differences by country and period.

The dissolution of wealthy rural monasteries in the Dutch Republic and England meant a reduction of rural relief. Poor relief in the countryside in all three areas underwent further changes in the 18th and 19th centuries as a result of new ideas on agricultural improvement and liberal attacks on communal agriculture, common rights and common wastelands. After a long process of enclosure and privatisation of land that had started in the late Middle Ages, there was now an acceleration in the process in which land became privatised and remaining commons and open fields were split up.⁴³ Access for poor people to common wastelands and their rights of gleaning disappeared or were even explicitly prohibited.⁴⁴

The Napoleonic period presented a discontinuity for the urban charitable system, too, especially in Italy. The revolutionary ideal was centralisation of poor relief and stronger state involvement. Independent corporations providing relief were to be abolished or consolidated through the establishment of the Bureaux de Bienfaisance. In Italy changes were far-reaching, in part because the Napoleonic reforms were often preceded by 18th century enlightened absolutism calling for more state intervention.⁴⁵ In Tuscany, for instance, such reforms were undertaken by grand-duke Leopold. Confraternities were suppressed and their properties were transferred to diocesan committees to support priests and the poor, while the suppression of religious orders

³⁹ Rushton, 'Monastic'.

⁴⁰ McIntosh, *Poor relief*, 7–8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* pp. 225ff; Slack, *Poverty and policy* on the Poor Laws; Dyer, 'Poverty' on medieval antecedents.

⁴² Slack, *From Reformation*, pp. 158–166.

⁴³ Neeson, *Commoners*, pp. 187ff on England; Perol, *Cortona*, p. 92 for an Italian example.

⁴⁴ King, 'Gleaners, farmers'; Humphries, 'Enclosures'.

⁴⁵ Cavallo, *Charity and power*, pp. 183–199. For Tuscany: Woolf, *Poor*, pp. 78–80, 134–136.

mainly benefitted the hospitals. However, properties were sometimes reassigned to fit the needs of the state, as also happened in the Napoleonic period, while the restructuring of public debts likewise injured charitable institutions. Still, the consolidation of institutions was not complete. The Bureaux de Bienfaisance were supposed to be consolidated institutions, but in reality some separate institutions continued their operations. The Restoration and Catholic revival after the Napoleonic period fuelled private charity again and charitable foundations were able to recover somewhat from the previous, turbulent period. State funding of poor relief, however, was kept to a bare minimum.⁴⁶

In the Netherlands, discontinuity was less severe and the segments of the relief system affected by Napoleonic reforms were largely restored after 1815. Overall, the fragmented system of the Dutch Republic continued to function largely unchanged until the 20th century.⁴⁷ Poor relief in England was obviously not affected by the French conquests. In fact, relief there was at an all-time high to meet the subsistence crises during this period. However, with the weight of intellectuals like Malthus and Ricardo behind them, relief spending declined after the enactment of the New Poor Law in 1834.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Farrell-Vinay, 'Welfare provision; Woolf, *Poor*, 86-88.

⁴⁷ Prak, *Republikeinse veelvoud*, 309-310; Kort, *Armoede*, 67-78 on successful centralization; Van Leeuwen, *Bijstand*, 84-87; Pot, *Arm Leiden*, 156-157 on more common failed attempts.

⁴⁸ Boyer, 'Old Poor Law', 114–115 on the contemporary debate. However, Boyer, 'Economic model' also shows economic reasons behind the rise and fall of the poor rates in England.

II

In this section we will try to calculate the total amount of formal poor relief for the three cases and express this figure as a share of GDP. Several types of sources are available to this end. Apart from 19th-century statistical works, most of these sources were not compiled to assess total relief, but for administrative or fiscal purposes, or they derive from studies based on these types of sources. They usually give insight into the total budget of the charitable foundations and organisations, while only a few give a direct overview of the net expenses on poor relief proper, that is, excluding overhead costs and other non-relief expenses. Around 1800 in Western Europe overhead costs lay between 10 and 30 % of the total budget.⁴⁹ At the beginning of our research period this figure was little different. On average, late-medieval welfare institutions spent some 10–15 % on overheads and another 15 % on religious obligations.⁵⁰ Some charitable organisations became focused on activities other than poor relief, however, and their budget shares on relief could be as low as half of total expenditures. For example, this was the case for the *scuole* of 16th- and 17th-century Venice and some confraternities in 15th-century Florence.⁵¹ Based on scattered figures like these, we estimate 30 % was spent on overheads and religion if there were no direct estimates available. Conversely, religious organisations which did not have relief as their prime goal, such as monasteries in the Middle Ages, could nonetheless spend substantial amounts on charity, and we will try to include them.⁵²

⁴⁹ Lindert, 'Poor relief', pp. 121-122.

⁵⁰ Rijpma, 'Funding public services', 196–204; Henderson, *Piety and charity*, 182, 201,

⁵¹ Pullan, *Rich and Poor*, pp. 128-129; Henderson, *Piety and charity*, 370-372.

⁵² Rushton, 'Monastic'.

Italy

The earliest estimate for Italian social spending can be derived from the famous 1427 Catasto census. This estimates of the wealth of religious and charitable organisations in the diocese of Florence have been converted to incomes using a 7 per cent rate of return.⁵³ Surprisingly low spending shares from the literature were used to convert incomes to expenditures on social spending : 13 % of their income by confraternities and 55 % by the hospitals.⁵⁴ This leads to a social spending estimate of 8,000 florins in 1427. For GDP, Malanima's estimate of 16 florins per capita was used.⁵⁵ This means social spending by religious and charitable organisations stood at 0.45 % of regional GDP (town and countryside).

For Florence, figures are also available for the 1790s. Stuart Woolf reports that the Congregation of S. Giovanni Battista, when it was subsumed in the Bureau de Bienfaisance, provided 33–45 % of outdoor relief in the city. Based on its average expenditures for the period 1791–1800 and assuming its share in total relief remained the same, total outdoor relief in the city was 117,000–160,000 lire. In 1794, this means that total outdoor relief in the city of Florence was 0.7–1 per cent of GDP.⁵⁶ Indoor relief by hospitals should be added to this figure. It was claimed that the Congregation helped 8,600 people whereas there were 1,600 people in Florence's hospitals at any given time. Assuming similar expenditures per recipient and correcting outdoor relief by this 20 % provides a figure of 0.8–1.1 %.⁵⁷

Another indication of relief in Italy is offered by figures for Genoa in 1591. Here, the consolidated relief organisation called the Ufficio dei Poveri had 115,000 lire in expenses and in 1696 the then formed "*opus publicum*" named Albergo dei Poveri spent 128,000 lire annually.⁵⁸ This would mean that this institution distributed a share of about 1.9 % (1591) and 1.6 % (1696) of local GDP.

An important caveat is that the Genoese information covers only the city. Generally speaking, little is known about social spending in the Italian countryside, making it difficult to calculate estimates. Some villages did have formal relief funds and smaller, family-controlled charities, mainly created through legacies and other voluntary contributions. A late 16th-century survey from Bergamo found institutional charities, usually called Misericordia, in 143 out of 249 villages. Many villages in the Tuscan countryside, too, had religious confraternities that supported

⁵³ Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans* on the surveys; the data from

<<http://disc.wisc.edu/archive/catasto/index.html>>. For the conversion see Appendix 1.

⁵⁴ Henderson, *Piety and charity*, pp. 102, 107, 182–183, 201, 371; Henderson, *Renaissance hospital*, p. 64.

⁵⁵ Malanima, 'Long decline'. For all the following underlying GDP and population calculations see Appendix 1.

⁵⁶ Woolf, *Poor*, pp. 162.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 163–4.

⁵⁸ Grendi, *Repubblica aristocratica*, pp. 242–243.

the poor materially.⁵⁹ In 18th-century Piedmont, many Santo Spirito confraternities with a similar function were active in rural areas.⁶⁰ Like many of the other charities discussed here, they were governed by community officials and funded from endowments. Funds could sometimes be substantial, as the Napoleonic regime in Tuscany observed when making an inventory of relief organisations in 1810.⁶¹ Abbeys and other religious organisations probably did not play a big role in rural charity, at least not from the 15th or 16th century onwards.⁶²

One formalised system of charity in the countryside were the *monti frumentari*, or “grain banks”, which were key in allowing peasants to acquire food and seed in time of grain shortages. These rural versions of the Monti di Pietà made grain available on favourable terms, and their below-market interest rates were social transfers as well. At the end of the 16th century, 20–40% of rural communes had these lending facilities, though the number had declined to 10% by the start of the 18th century. State grain supply agencies throughout Italy could provide similar services. Traditionally, *annone* policies were aimed at getting enough food from the countryside into the city, especially in times of famine. However, from the 16th century onwards they began looking after both town and countryside.⁶³ For instance, the agency called the *Abbondanza* provided seed for farmers in 18th-century Tuscany.⁶⁴ The expenses of these institutions varied widely per year, since in times of need their spending could increase dramatically. More generally, the fact that in Italy public organisations in cases of dearth intervened in the market, may have resulted in more spikes in spending than in other parts of Europe where expenses were more fixed. This may lead to underestimation of the Italian expenses on charity.

Another semi-formalised form of relief, embedded in customs or local by-laws, was the practice of gleaning and access to the commons offered to people in need.⁶⁵ Even at the beginning of the 20th century, the prohibition of the right of gleaning on the lands of big landowners in Basilicata led to rural unrest and land occupations, involving thousands of wage labourers, day-workers and rural poor.⁶⁶ Lack of information, however, prohibits us to quantify its

⁵⁹ De la Roncière, ‘Place des confréries’, pp. 38–44.

⁶⁰ Farrell-Vinay, ‘Welfare provision’, p. 257.

⁶¹ Woolf, *Poor*, pp. 87–88.

⁶² Kindly suggested by Guido Alfani, d.d. 25-8-2012. The hospital of Altopascio explicitly not supporting the local poor is a striking example: McArdle, *Altopascio*, pp. 184–187; see also Pullan, ‘Support’, p. 73 on rural charities and the Monti Frumentari.

⁶³ Alfani, *Calamities and the economy*, pp. 72–8; Rosolino, ‘Justice in the marketplace’; Reinhardt, *Annona und Getreideversorgung*, pp. 428ff.

⁶⁴ McArdle, *Altopascio*, p. 187.

⁶⁵ See n. [18] above.

⁶⁶ Lisanti, *Movimento cooperativo*, p. 38.

importance for Italy. All these relief efforts were probably at lower than urban relief, as is also suggested by the fact that the rural poor flooded Italian towns in times of scarcity.⁶⁷

If the case of Genoa is representative of the Italian towns more generally, and if formalised poor relief in the countryside was indeed lower, this would put the share of formalised poor relief in Genoa and its countryside below 1.5 % of GDP. An even lower figure that includes rural relief is found for Piedmont in 1750. The charities there, including confraternities, had 1.2 million lire in revenues, which meant poor relief came to 0.4 % of GDP. In the Napoleonic period, policies aimed against confraternities reduced relief in Piedmont. After a period of restoration and recovery in the post-Napoleonic period, Piedmont in 1861 had 149 hospitals which owned 67 million lire in properties, yielding 3.8 million lire per year in revenues.⁶⁸ Assuming the share of hospitals in overall social spending, as before, was about half, total relief would have amounted to 7.6 million lire resulting in an estimate of 0.7 % of GDP. This, however, is a minimum, as also becomes evident from the country-wide figures from 1868 (see below), which suggest a figure of 0.9 % for Piedmont.

In general, the Napoleonic period was difficult for Italian relief organisations, as they lost some of their property and their administration was neglected. After 1815, there were further reorganisations. This was the case in Venice, where the reorganised *Pubblica Beneficenza* in 1815 had 840,000 lire in revenues and 1.2 million lire in expenses.⁶⁹ This meant charitable expenses were 1.8 % of local GDP.

In 1868, total assistance by 17,718 data-providing charities in Italy was 70 million lire, or 0.73 % of GDP, and in 1881 this was 0.79 %.⁷⁰ As remarked by Lindert, this is a low share. However, charitable expenses of religious organisations should be added to this figure. These foundations – which often also spent on relief – were not included in the Italian survey of 1868. They are, however, included in a list based on a mortmain tax on corporations (*Corpi morali*). Assuming that these corporations (bishoprics, church fabrics, religious houses, schools, confraternities) spent 5 % of their 69.1 million lire income on charity, we should add another 3.5 million lire, increasing total formalised poor relief in Italy to around 73.5 million lire, or 0.8 % of GDP.⁷¹

With respect to the net expenses on charity, there were also regional differences within Italy in the 19th century. Overall, 69 % of the expenses of charitable organisations in 1868 went on actual poor relief. This percentage was much lower in the south, where only about 50 % was spent

⁶⁷ Pullan, 'Support', pp. 71–2, 82–83.

⁶⁸ Farrel-Vinay, 'Welfare provision', pp. 259, 261, 268, 276. See for the following calculation: Appendix 1.

⁶⁹ De Kiriaki, 'Opere pie' pp. 513–514.

⁷⁰ Lindert, *Growing Public*, p. 42. The original data in Maestri, *Italia economica* pp. 153–158.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 158. Section III below on geographical differences within Italy.

on poor relief and the rest on religious services (approximately 20 %) and overhead.⁷² The overall figures for Italy are thus low, but much lower in the south than in the north.

[insert Table 1 here]

The Netherlands

Formalised social spending by all known religious and charitable organisations in the western provinces of the Low Countries around 1530, is estimated at 1 % of GDP.⁷³ The differences in the share of GDP spent on charitable purposes were small between the four provinces investigated (Holland, Brabant, Flanders and the Nedersticht), but differences between localities within these provinces were large, with social expenditures ranging from 0.1 to 1 guilder per capita. The basis for these estimates is a broad sample of accounts of these organisations, used to determine the share of their income used for social spending. Next, the incomes of all known charities in the western Low Countries were estimated from multiple tax sources and administrative material from the charities themselves to arrive at total social spending.⁷⁴ This estimate captures formalised poor relief through a wide variety of charities, including hospitals and poor tables as well as the many small contributions from ecclesiastical organisations such as monasteries and parish churches. However, forms of relief such as the use of commons and gleaning by poor villagers are not included. These practices would have been important in inland regions where commons were extensive, as in sandy Drenthe and the Campine. Although the value of these forms of relief is hard to quantify, they were probably less important in the commercialised, pastoral Holland countryside. There is also the possibility that part of the tithes was used for relief, although the many tithes owned by monasteries and chapters – and their expenses on poor relief – are already included in the sample.

For the Early Modern period, Van Nederveen-Meerkerk and Teeuwen have used the accounts of relief organisations to estimate social spending in the Holland cities of Delft in 1742 and Leiden in 1750 at 4.5 % and 1.6 % of local GDP respectively. These are lower-bound estimates because not all charitable organisations are included. At the same time, however, these estimates do not cover the countryside where relief may have been lower. To get a sense of the number of people this spending supported, consider the elderly in Leiden in 1749. Of the 6,000 or so elderly people, 500 were living in almshouses, 300 in hospitals, and another 300 received poor

⁷² Farrell-Vinay, *Povert  e politica*, p. 134; Maestri, *Italia economica*, p. 157.

⁷³ Rijpma, 'Funding public services', pp. 236-252

⁷⁴ This figure is higher than the previous estimates suggesting relief could only feed 1 % of the population: Van Bavel, 'Zorg', p. 81 on Utrecht; Blockmans and Prevenier, 'Armoede', pp., 519-527 on 's-Hertogenbosch.

relief. Together, they comprised more than 3 % of the total population of Leiden, although they often represented middling groups, not society's most destitute.⁷⁵

De Vries and Van der Woude have used early 19th-century government reports on charities to estimate social spending in all of the provinces of the former Dutch Republic at 8–10 million guilders prior to 1811.⁷⁶ This would be 3 to 4 % of national income (estimated at about 270 million guilders), with the percentage being highest in the coastal provinces.⁷⁷ De Vries and Van der Woude use 1815–1829 estimates on relief spending of 5 million guilders which they correct for the effects of the 1811 Dutch government bond default to get to a pre-1811 estimate.

The same government reports can also shed light on social spending after the French period. In 1822, relief spending by charity-houses, relief offices, poor schools, orphanages, hospitals, and outdoor relief to the poor was 10 million guilders for the entire Low Countries (including present-day Belgium), with 5.6–6.0 million guilders spent in the provinces of the former Dutch Republic (approximately the present-day Netherlands). Of the latter amount, 2.5 million originated from asset returns, 1.3 million from collections and 1.8 million from subsidies by municipalities and provinces. The total of 5.6–6.0 million was 1.4–1.5 % of national income, estimated at 406 million guilders, although this share differed widely between the Dutch provinces. Holland was easily the province with most social spending accounting for over 3 million guilders.⁷⁸

Poor relief in the countryside, and outside Holland, is less-investigated. Still, the information available suggests a similar decline of poor relief in the decades around 1800. A telling example is offered by the coastal area of Groningen, in the north of the country. Here, in the early modern period, a dense network of Calvinist poor-relief organisations had been developed at the local level. However, the economic growth in the early nineteenth century did not translate into higher poor relief. On the contrary, due to rising food prices and growing proletarianisation the relief system came under increasing pressure and real expenditure per capita declined from fl. 2 per capita in 1770–90 to fl. 1.4 in 1800–1860, amounting to 1 % of regional income.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Van Nederveen-Meerkerk and Teeuwen, 'Voluntary giving', p. 17. They calculated local GDP from city population figures and GDP per capita for Holland.

⁷⁶ De Vries and Van der Woude, *First modern economy*, pp. 654–664, esp. p. 660.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 702 for the GDP estimates for the mid-18th century, corroborated by Van Leeuwen and Van Zanden, 'Persistent', online appendix p. 52.

⁷⁸ Mokyr, *Industrialization*, p. 196, using an 1822 parliamentary report: Kamerstukken II, 1822/23, 21, pp. 846–863: <<http://www.statengeneraaldigitaal.nl/document?id=sgd%3A18221823%3A0000157>>. This report is also at the basis of the estimates in Porter, *Progress*, p. 113 and De Vries and Van der Woude's. GDP estimates from Smits, Horlings, and Van Zanden, 'Dutch GDP', p. 219. For regional differences see section IV.

⁷⁹ Paping, *Werken*, pp. 271ff, 360–1 for the fl. 139 GDP per capita figure in 1831/50. Calculating regional income from population and wage figures from De Vries and Van der Woude, *First modern economy*, p. 58 and Mokyr, *Industrialization* gives a similar estimate for 1822.

England

Thanks to a number of recent investigations, total formalised charity in England for the period around 1500 can be estimated. Monastic charity probably stood at £ 13,000 per annum, based on the insight that a higher share of their revenues was spent on charity than assumed before, up to 7–9 %.⁸⁰ The 617 hospitals and almshouses had 5,347 and 1,645 inhabitants respectively. Hospitals provided full board so we use Chris Dyer's subsistence estimate of £ 1.5 per person annually.⁸¹ Almshouses usually did not provide full board and are estimated from McIntosh's data on their stipends at £ 0.325 per annum in 1550, or £ 0.18 in money of 1500.⁸² Total expenditure on poor relief by hospitals and almshouses in England thus comes to £ 8,221. Dyer's estimates of the various other sources of relief in the countryside shows that the total of funeral doles and alms, alms stipulated in wills, vicarage, parochial and fraternity alms and common boxes amounted to £ 5 per year for an average village of 300 inhabitants.⁸³ With a rural population of 2.1 million, these sources of relief could come to £ 35,530.⁸⁴ Urban relief might be expected to differ, but projecting Archer's estimate of similar relief sources for 1570–3 London back to c. 1500 gives a similar £ 1.7 per 100 persons per year.⁸⁵ With an urban population of 68,200 urban relief is estimated at £ 1,100. With nominal GDP in England and Wales in 1495–1505 at £ 4 million, the total social spending of £ 58,000 meant 1.5% was spent on relief.⁸⁶

From the late 17th century onwards, several estimates of mandatory and voluntary contributions to poor relief exist.⁸⁷ Since most of these estimates are similar, we report only the important ones. Gregory King estimated that in 1685 national poor relief was £ 665,000.⁸⁸ Similar figures perhaps lie at the basis of another estimate, made by the Board of Trade in 1696, suggesting that the poor rates redistributed some £ 400,000 annually. To this an approximate £ 150,000 spent by endowed charities should be added.⁸⁹ Another, probably related, estimate

⁸⁰ Rushton and Sigle-Rushton, 'Monastic', p. 123.

⁸¹ Dyer, 'Poverty', p. 48.

⁸² McIntosh, *Poor relief*, p. 75, online appendix 7, available at <<http://ebooks.cambridge.org/ebook.jsf?bid=CBO9781139057547>>; the CPI deflator from Allen, 'Great divergence'.

⁸³ Dyer, 'Poverty', p. 77. £ 2 of this £ 5 consisted of returns on endowments and are included under *Institutions* in table 2; the remainder consisted of direct gifts and bequests.

⁸⁴ Population from the appendix to Broadberry et al., 'British economic growth' available at <<http://www.basvanleeuwen.net/Data.htm>>; urbanisation from De Vries, *European urbanization*.

⁸⁵ Archer, *Pursuit of stability*, 167, 181, the deflator from Allen, 'Great divergence'. Arguably, using the CPI to deflate late sixteenth-century relief figures leads to an underestimate since McIntosh, *Poor relief*, pp. 202, 79–80, claims that inflation eroded real social spending.

⁸⁶ All English GDP estimates from Broadberry et al., 'British economic growth'.

⁸⁷ E.g., Eden, *State of the poor*, p. 400; Colquhoun, *Treatise on indigence*, p. 36.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Slack, *Poverty and policy*, 170–2, relying on Hadwin, 'Problem of poverty' for the endowed charities.

from 1696 suggests approximately £440,000 was channelled through the poor rates and £210,000 through hospitals and other corporations.⁹⁰ Nominal GDP in 1685–94 was £54.6 million, so social spending came to 1.2 % of GDP.

Lindert uses a parliamentary report from 1839 and figures from George Porter to estimate relief from 1749 onwards. When we combine these figures with Broadberry et al.'s new GDP estimates, we see the steady rise of relief expenditures until their sharp decline after the introduction of the New Poor Law in 1834 (figure 1). Lindert further mentions that expenditures by private charities in England and Wales in 1819/37 came to an additional 0.4 % of GDP, which declined to 0.1 % in 1861/76.⁹¹

[Insert Figure 1 here]

A potentially important contribution to poor relief came from direct bequests – charitable gifts that did not end up in institutional endowments. Wilbur Jordan has used the extensive registration of wills in the diocesan Prerogative Courts to gather a near-complete collection of English wills.⁹² J.F. Hadwin's recalculations show that direct bequests made up some £1,000 per annum in the first decades of the sixteenth century.⁹³ By 1660 this figure had grown to about £10,000. As a check to these figures, Dyer's estimates of sources of village-level poor relief show that per village about 6s. 8d. came from bequests (excluding informal gifts like funeral doles and parochial gifts) implying that £3,000 came from wills. Comparing these figures to institutionalised relief based on returns from asset endowments shows that English relief through bequests in the late middle ages was 3–9 % of relief provided through endowments. This figure can be compared to Archer's breakdown of poor relief in London between 1570–1597. His sample of all surviving wills for two four-year periods, shows that private charity at death came to 10–18 % of endowment-based relief.⁹⁴ Overall, direct charitable bequests probably stood at around 10 % of institutionalised relief.

In the English countryside, at least in several regions, the poor also benefited from the possibilities offered by gleaning and access to commons. These practices had become more important in the 16th and 17th centuries, as population growth led to a much more intensive use

⁹⁰ Innes, "Mixed economy", pp. 147–149. Similar figures lie at the basis of the estimate by Lindert 'Poor relief', p. 114: 1.2 % of GDP.

⁹¹ Lindert, *Growing Public*, pp. 41–42; Porter, *Progress*, p. 78; Innes, "Mixed economy", p. 148. Charities here include only truly private charities, not the corporate charities and hospitals, which seem to be included in Lindert's figures on government-related poor relief.

⁹² Jordan, 'Philanthropy in England', pp. 22–3.

⁹³ Hadwin, 'Deflating charity', p. 111.

⁹⁴ Archer, *Pursuit of stability*, pp. 166, 181.

of these resources by the poor.⁹⁵ As the enclosure movement gathered pace in the second half of the 17th century, however, attacks on common lands, wasteland and traditional usage rights grew.⁹⁶ Nonetheless, around 1800 gleaning still accounted for £ 2–3 per poor family per year on average in parishes where gleaning was a customary right.⁹⁷ Based on the share of parishes reporting gleaning in 1834 and assuming that the poorest third of the households there actually gleaned, we find that some 74,000 out of 1.6 million rural households supplemented their income by gleaning. This makes for £ 196,000, or 0.08 % of England's £ 246 million GDP.⁹⁸ In the 19th century, as a result of technological changes in harvesting, gleaning became less important. Farmers also pressed for reduction or abolition of the right of gleaning and they increasingly found the law on their side.⁹⁹

Like gleaning, the rights to common lands of the rural poor was also under pressure by the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, even at this time the income derived from access to common land in some regions could be substantial. The most valuable resource the commons provided was the right to pasture up to two cows. Data from Northamptonshire around 1800 suggest that 24 % of the dwellings had a right of access to common lands and were owned by poor or middling groups.¹⁰⁰ With 1.6 million rural households and the annual value of grazing a cow at around £ 4,¹⁰¹ pasture of one or two cows had a total value of £ 1.5–3 million, or 0.6–1.1 % of English GDP. This is a maximum figure, since some regions did not have these rights, or only to a lesser extent.

[insert Table 2 here]

[insert Figure 2 here]

The share of GDP transferred through (semi-)public social assistance in these three cases thus fluctuated between less than 1 % and more than 3 %. There are striking geographical differences in these figures. As a share of GDP, the Netherlands and England spent more on public assistance than Italy. Differences in per capita social spending between towns or regions within

⁹⁵ Woodward, 'Exploitation'

⁹⁶ Neeson, *Commoners*.

⁹⁷ King, 'Customary rights', pp. 462–465; Humphries, 'Enclosures', p. 35.

⁹⁸ County population from Eden, *State of the poor*; Broadberry et al., 'English medieval population'. See also Appendix 2.

⁹⁹ King, 'Gleaners, farmers'.

¹⁰⁰ Shaw-Taylor, 'Parliamentary enclosure', pp. 651–2. For the underlying assumptions see Appendix 2.

¹⁰¹ Humphries, 'Enclosures', pp. 26–7.

these countries could be just as large.¹⁰² These totals may seem low by the standards of today's welfare states. However, the highest shares were as high as government social transfers would be until the 20th century.¹⁰³ Moreover, in view of low income levels, there were fewer surpluses to be redistributed anyway, so the effort pre-industrial societies made to allocate resources to relief was large relative to wealthier societies. Furthermore, low incomes and the precarious situation of many people at the lower income end, also meant small amounts could be important.

III

This section aims to bring a sharper perspective to geographical differences in public assistance. It will first discuss the regional differences within the countries already covered, followed by a cursory look at other Western European countries. Differences within countries were large, as clearly was the case in Italy. The figures for 1868 show that social expenses in Lombardy, Piedmont, Liguria, Emilia-Romagna and the Marches ranged from 4.4 to 5.7 lire per person, whereas southern regions such as Apulia, Calabria and Basilicata were at half that level or even below (0.7–1.5 lire).¹⁰⁴ As a share of GDP, relief in the north was probably 1-1.5 % and 0.5 % or less in the south. Our more fragmented findings for earlier periods suggest similar differences existed before the 19th century.

Differences within the Netherlands were equally large, with by far the highest share spent on social relief in western parts. Expenses on poor relief per inhabitant in 1822 were highest in the province of South Holland (fl. 4.5 per person) and in North Holland, Utrecht and Friesland (fl. 3.0–3.6). Far below the national average of fl. 2.5 were the poorer eastern and southern regions of North Brabant (fl. 0.9) and Drenthe (fl. 0.8).¹⁰⁵

Relief figures in England has also been broken down by county. Here too poor relief per head of the population again displayed substantial discrepancies. Southern counties like Essex, Sussex, and Buckinghamshire spent over £ 0.20 in 1690 and £ 0.30 per person in 1776 whereas northern counties like Durham and Cumberland spent under £ 0.08 in 1690 and under £ 0.10 in 1776.¹⁰⁶

Similar differences existed in the southern Low Countries, present-day Belgium. Flanders and Brabant spent 1 % of their regional GDP on formalised charity in c. 1500, similar to spending

¹⁰² Rijpma, 'Funding public services', p. 252.

¹⁰³ Lindert, 'Rise', p. 11. See also below, section V.

¹⁰⁴ Maestri, *Italia economica*, p. 156.

¹⁰⁵ Mokyr, *Industrialization*, p. 196.

¹⁰⁶ Eden, *State of the poor*, p. 229–30; population estimates for 1700 from *Abstract of the answers* (P.P. 1812 XI), p. xxviii. See for the regional pattern also: King, 'Poverty and welfare', pp. 256–62.

in Holland.¹⁰⁷ By 1822, total social spending stood at 2.7 million guilders in the northern, Dutch-speaking parts (Flanders and Brabant), against 1.2 million in the southern, French-speaking parts of Belgium (Luxembourg, Liège, Hainault and Namur). Per inhabitant, in 1822, expenses on poor relief in Belgium were on average 1.3 guilders, compared to 2.5 in the Netherlands. The only provinces where Dutch levels were reached were South Brabant and Antwerp (fl. 2), while the lowest levels were in Liège, Limburg and Luxembourg, that is, the south-east of Belgium.¹⁰⁸ By 1856, most social spending was still funded through asset returns and the distribution by region had hardly changed. The combined relief expenditure by the hospitals and the Bureaux de Bienfaisance in Brabant and Flanders was around Fr. 5 per capita, whereas the poor of Liège, Namur, and Luxemburg had to make to do with half of that amount.¹⁰⁹

In France, around 1764, total revenues of hospitals were some 14 million livres, while royal expenses on relief amounted to several millions per year and separate funds were dispensed for foundlings. In total, some 25-30 million livres were spent on relief along these lines, which amounted to the low share of 0.5 % of GDP.¹¹⁰ Figures for around 1790 indicate that the share of GDP spent as formalised poor relief at that point was around 0.5 %.¹¹¹ This low figure is not due to incompleteness of the data: the sources encompass most sources of relief, at least for the towns. In the *Documents Statistiques sur la France* from 1833 a full overview of charitable institutions is given.¹¹² In that year, the sums devoted to charitable purposes and foundling hospitals in the towns are estimated at 10.5 million francs. There were also the Bureaux de Bienfaisance, outdoor relief organisations, which spent another 9 million francs. Finally, spending by hospitals and almshouses amounted to about 50 million francs. The total is approximately 70 million francs, which corresponds to the 2.2 francs per person used by Lindert to calculate that 0.63 % of French GDP was spent on formalised relief in 1833.

The level of formalised poor relief in the north of France, however, was much higher than in the south. In 1791 the Comité de Mendicité's overview shows that the level of relief was around 1 livre per inhabitant in the Nord/French Flanders and some other regions in the north of France, and 0.5 to 0.9 livre in Artois, Picardy, the Ile-de-France and the eastern parts of France, as compared to 0.2 to 0.4 livre in the south and even below 0.2 livre per inhabitant in central France.¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ Rijpma, 'Funding public services', 249.

¹⁰⁸ Mokyr, *Industrialization*, p. 193–197.

¹⁰⁹ Moreaux-Van Neck, 'Assistance publique'.

¹¹⁰ Figures are derived from Bloch, *Assistance*, 260-269 and 281-288.

¹¹¹ Lindert, 'Poor relief', pp. 107.

¹¹² Porter, *Progress*, p. 99. For the original *Documents Statistiques*: <<http://books.google.nl/books?id=mMFBAAAAcAAJ>>.

¹¹³ Hufton, *Poor*, pp. 173-176.

Until their abolition in 1790, tithing may have provided additional poor relief in the countryside. This possibility is put forward by Mathieu Arnoux, based on the small amount of qualitative information available on this topic.¹¹⁴ The extent of this type of poor relief is hard to measure, however. If the formal one-fourth to one-third of tithes was indeed given to the poor, this would mean that 20–45 million livres out of the total tithe revenues of 60 to 130 million livres in the 18th century was spent on relief. This is probably an overestimate, but it could bring social spending before the Revolution up to some 1 % of GDP. However, most of this relief would be in the grain-growing regions of the north where tithes were more important, further accentuating the difference between the north and south of France.

In 18th-century Denmark, poor relief was financed by town rates, and at the end of the century by excise and income taxes. Nonetheless, 19th-century figures suggest that the level of poor relief was not very high. In the second half of that century, government poor relief amounted to 0.6-0.9 % of GDP.¹¹⁵

For Spain, general figures exist for c. 1800. In 1798–1808, the disentailment policies of prime minister Godoy also affected the properties of hospitals, almshouses, poor relief offices, orphanages, confraternities and foundations. They held 15 % of the religious immovable property and almost 3 % of total immovable property in Spain. This means they owned roughly the same share of immovable property as the hospitals and confraternities of Tuscany in 1427 and this will not have amounted to a much larger share of GDP than found there: 0.5 %.¹¹⁶ Critical reports, moreover, suggested that only one-third of the confraternities' annual expenditures of 11.5 million reales in 1770 was actually spent on poor relief.¹¹⁷

These reconstructions display a clear geographical pattern of high shares of national income spent on poor relief in England, the west of the Netherlands and the west of Belgium, and to a somewhat lesser extent the north of France and the north of Italy. Much lower shares are found in the centre and south of France and the south of Italy. The core area of social spending is therefore located around the southern shores of the North Sea. It has been suggested earlier that this was an area of high social spending.¹¹⁸ However, it is striking that the Scandinavian countries were not yet part of the welfare club and that the pattern holds not so much on a country-wide basis, but at a regional level.

¹¹⁴ Arnoux, 'Économie historique' and his e-mail d.d. 27-7-2012.

¹¹⁵ Woolf, *Poor*, p. 83; and for the figures: Lindert, *Growing Public*, p. 113.

¹¹⁶ Rijpma, 'Funding public services', pp. 120, 123 on Tuscan charitable institutions' ownership of immovable property.

¹¹⁷ Carlos Martín, 'Carità e società'.

¹¹⁸ Heerma van Voss, 'Embarrassment of poverty'.

IV

We now turn to the possible causes of the observed differences in levels of social spending. To this end, we will discuss the implications of our findings for some of the main causes suggested in the literature, that is: income, income inequality, urbanisation, religion and the degree of political participation. We will start with income. Lindert's Robin Hood paradox states that wealthier countries have relatively higher shares of social spending.¹¹⁹ The fact that they have the surplus income to redistribute in the first place might matter. This would mean that higher wealth “automatically” translates into a higher share spent on social assistance. Inequality might enter into this explanation for the same reason.

The evidence seems to suggest that the link between income and social spending was weak in the long period before the welfare state. On the one hand, the wealthier western part of the Netherlands spent higher shares on relief than the eastern part. On the other hand, Tuscany did not have very high social spending during its medieval apogee. Moreover, neither Holland's decline in the 18th century nor England's growth in the 18th and 19th centuries translated into the expected changes in social spending.

Our breakdown of the sources of poor relief can provide part of the explanation. A large share of total social spending was financed through the asset returns of charitable institutions. Even if donations to charitable institutions would dwindle during economic decline and rise during economic upswings, the fact that most revenues were fixed returns from immovable property, prevented large absolute decreases in the short run. If revenues held up during economic decline, the share of charity in GDP could even increase.

[insert Table 3 here]

The demand for relief could also drive relief spending. If a society had more people in need of support, and the resources and willingness existed to provide it, social assistance would be higher. Arguably the most important group to look at in this respect are the elderly. The little evidence available on age distributions for our period, however, does not suggest the size of this vulnerable group mattered for social spending. For one, the elderly were small in number. People aged 60 and over were only 6.7 % of the population in Italy in 1861.¹²⁰ Moreover, the relation with social spending is the opposite of what we would expect. Shortly after the Black Death, Tuscany had far more elderly (20 %) in 1427 than England's 10.1 % in 1716 (the highest in the period 1541–1871).

¹¹⁹ Lindert, *Growing public*, pp. 15–16; Heerma van Voss, ‘Embarrassment of poverty’.

¹²⁰ Maestri, *Italia economica*, p. 109.

Moreover, the share of the elderly in England between 1541 and 1871 followed a different trend than our relief estimates. The share of elderly was lowest in the 16th century, it peaked around 1700, and declined in the 18th and early 19th centuries.¹²¹

It is possible that the care for the elderly and for the other needy in many cases was performed in more informal ways and therefore not included in our survey of formal poor relief. In many areas, the family would have supported the elderly. Formal poor relief could thus have increased as a result of the declining role of family and kin in the provision of welfare, as arguably happened in Early Modern England. Formal and informal relief would thus in part act as communicating vessels.¹²² A larger role of family and kin may thus also in part explain low formal poor relief in Italy. Similarly, it is possible that a bigger role of begging compensated for lower levels of formal poor relief there.

Another possible factor is religion. Woolf and Lindert suggest that Catholic countries had lower shares of social assistance than Protestant ones.¹²³ Woolf states that in the early modern period only some Protestant countries, such as England, the Dutch Republic and Denmark, forced the wealthy minority by law to support the poor majority. Lindert observes this based on differences around 1800 between the high shares in Protestant England and the Netherlands on the one hand and the low shares of 0.5–1 % found for France and Italy on the other. He suggests that these differences persisted up to the Second World War. Little investigation has been undertaken so far on this subject for the pre-industrial period,¹²⁴ but our figures suggest the link with religion in this period is not straightforward. Differences developed in the 17th century between Protestant England and the Netherlands on the one hand and Catholic Italy on the other, but other observations challenge a crucial role for religion. There is, for instance, the very gradual change in relief levels in pre- and post-Reformation England and the Netherlands. Also, there are large regional differences between Drenthe and Holland within the Protestant Netherlands, and also between the north and south within Catholic Italy. Striking also are the low levels of charity observed for Protestant Denmark and Norway at the beginning of the 19th century.

Next there is the factor of urbanisation. Again, our figures do not support a straightforward relation. In part, the high-spending area corresponds to the highly urbanised North Sea area.¹²⁵ Moreover, we observed that regional social spending was relatively high in the urban western provinces of the Low Countries. However, urban Tuscany showed only very modest social

¹²¹ Wrigley and Schofield, *Population history*, pp. 443–450, 528–9 and the online data from Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans*.

¹²² Lambrecht, 'Welfare paradox'.

¹²³ Lindert, 'Poor relief', pp. 107–8; Woolf, *Poor*, p. 33.

¹²⁴ Pullan, 'Catholics, Protestants', considers the social and economic aspects of Protestant and Catholic relief similar. Parker, *Reformation* discusses organisational changes of poor relief, but not the scope.

¹²⁵ Heerma van Voss, 'Embarrassment of poverty'.

spending. Furthermore, the famous poor rates of England reached impressive figures in the countryside prior to the introduction of the New Poor Law of 1834. Finally, we emphasise that in the pre-industrial era the rural poor enjoyed rights to commons, gleaning, and tithes that have so far not been given enough attention in the analysis of poor relief at the country level.

Finally, democracy can provide an elegant and simple explanation for the rise of social spending. If political power is accessible to a large share of the population, the poor majority can decide in favour of social spending because it is in their benefit.¹²⁶ However, it is doubtful whether this holds for the period we focus on. Of course, England and the Dutch Republic already had strong parliaments before 1850, whereas the development of representative institutions in Italy, France, Spain and Denmark was more problematic.¹²⁷ Indeed, England and the Dutch Republic had relatively high levels of social spending. However, no country gave the vote to people who were sufficiently poor to expect the state to take from the rich to give to the poor. Rather, in 18th and early 19th-century England another mechanism seems to have been at play. Large landowners and labour-hiring farmers using their influence in Parliament to keep agricultural labour in the countryside and compete with urban labour markets by way of poor relief.¹²⁸ For countries other than England, however, an explanation of social spending focusing on the distribution of political power at the national level is inadequate to explain the regional and local differences within countries. More gains in future research, we suggest, will be possible by investigating the causal links at the local level, for instance by looking at patterns of corporate community formation.

V

To conclude, several parts of Western Europe spent high shares of GDP on formalised relief before the welfare state: the west of the Netherlands, England and the west of Belgium. These societies could spend up to 4 % of GDP on relief. In the north of France, the north of Italy, the east of the Netherlands and the east of Belgium this share was between 0.5 and 2 %, and in the rest of Europe it was lower. This geographical pattern had sharpened in the course of the early modern period, but our findings suggest that it was already present in the late medieval period.

We also find two possible avenues towards high social spending in the pre-industrial period: through corporations and associations (the Netherlands, Italy, and late medieval England) and through central organisation (early modern England). Where social spending was done by corporations, path dependency in spending patterns was strong. As social spending in these cases

¹²⁶ Persson and Tabellini, 'Political economy'; Lindert, *Growing public*.

¹²⁷ Van Zanden et al, 'European parliaments'.

¹²⁸ Boyer, 'Old poor law'.

was largely financed through the fairly static revenues of endowments, the extent of spending was only to a limited extent sensitive to political and economic changes. The exception was England, where the changes in the financing and management of poor relief in the 16th century greatly increased the influence of local and central governments over the relief system.

After c. 1800, in the other countries, too, poor relief increasingly became the domain of government and decisions in the political arena. This initially caused a drop in the share of GDP spent on relief there. In the period c. 1750–1850, the combination of French conquests with Enlightenment and liberal ideas about poor relief resulted in widespread policies directed against corporations, the abolishment or prohibition of guilds and confraternities, secularisation policies and general criticism of poor relief. With few initiatives by the central government to replace the old systems, social spending on the Continent around the middle of the 19th century was lower than before. For this reason, the 19th century can give a misleading picture about the pre-history of the welfare state. For instance, Lindert correctly shows low levels of poor relief around 1800, with the exception of England and to a lesser extent the Netherlands, convergence in the 19th century, and a slow rise only from the late 19th century on. However, when placed in the long-run view of this article, it seems that the first half of the 19th century was an exception and had lower levels of poor relief than before.

Moreover, pre-industrial figures are not necessarily much lower than those for 1850–1950. In the USA, in the period c. 1850–1920, government aid to the poor was only about 0.2 % of GDP and private charity another 0.2 %. In the 1920s to 1960s these figures rose to 1–2 % in the form of public and social welfare by the government, and still only 0.2 % in the form of private charity.¹²⁹ These figures are lower than those found for many parts of Western Europe in the pre-industrial period, despite the fact that the USA was the wealthiest country in the world in the first half of the 20th century, highly urbanised and dominated by a Protestant culture, that is, it possessed many of the characteristics often assumed to have stimulated formal relief. An associated insight is that the real break in social assistance only came about with the development of the modern welfare state in the second half of the 20th century. The Industrial Revolution and the associated rises in productivity did in themselves not cause a fundamental shift.

Moreover, in comparing and assessing the preceding pre-industrial figures of the share of GDP that societies devoted to charitable purposes, we have to take notice of much higher income levels in the modern period. At the low income levels of the period, a relatively large share was spent on subsistence and could not be redistributed at all. Even in the relatively advanced and wealthy cases of Italy and the Netherlands, this share was about a quarter of GDP, and elsewhere

¹²⁹ Lindert, *Growing Public*, pp. 61–63.

it was even higher. Arguably, social spending in pre-industrial societies is more impressive than in many of the far wealthier societies of the modern period..

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Appendix 1 Estimates for Italy

Religious and charitable organisations in the diocese of Florence, 1427

The earliest estimate for Italian social spending can be derived from the 1427 Catasto census. This contained estimates not only of the wealth of households of Florence and its surroundings, but also of that of religious and charitable organisations in the diocese of Florence.¹³⁰ The wealth estimates have been converted to incomes using a 7 per cent rate of return.¹³¹ Surprisingly low budget statements from the literature were used to convert incomes to expenditures on social spending: 13 % of their income by confraternities and 55 % by the hospitals.¹³² This leads to a social spending estimate of 8,000 florins in 1427.

Charitable institutions in Piedmont, 1750-1861

In 1750, the charities in Piedmont, including confraternities, had 1.2 million lire in revenues, half of which belonged to 141 hospitals.¹³³ Piedmont at that time had some 2.3 million people. At a nominal per capita GDP of 136 lire in the years around 1750, this meant poor relief came to 0.4 % of GDP.¹³⁴ In the Napoleonic period, policies aimed against confraternities reduced relief in Piedmont. This move was associated with French revolutionary ideology claiming that abundant relief had made the Piemontese lazy, although the small shares observed by us hardly warrant such a claim. After a period of restoration and recovery in the post-Napoleonic period, Piedmont in 1861 had 149 hospitals which owned 67 million lire in properties, yielding 3.8 million lire per year in revenues. Assuming the share of hospitals in overall social spending, as before, was about half, total relief would have amounted to 7.6 million lire¹³⁵ In this period, Piedmont with about 2.9 million inhabitants had a nominal per capita GDP of 358 lire, resulting in an estimate of 0.7 % of GDP. This, however, is a minimum, as also becomes evident from the country-wide figures from 1868,¹³⁶ which suggest a figure of 0.9 % for Piedmont.

¹³⁰ Herlihy and Klapish-Zuber, *Tuscans* on the surveys; the data from <http://disc.wisc.edu/archive/catasto/index.html>.

¹³¹ This was the rate used by the Florentine officials to estimate assets holdings from income streams, see Herlihy and Klapish-Zuber, *Tuscans*, 14–15; the same procedure was used by Milanovic, Lindert and Williamson, 'Pre-industrial inequality', elaborated at <http://gpih.ucdavis.edu/Distribution.htm>.

¹³² Henderson, *Piety and charity*, pp. 102, 107, 182–183, 201, 371; Henderson, *Renaissance hospital*, p. 64.

¹³³ Farrell-Vinay, 'Welfare provision in Piedmont', p. 259. For the following: Ibid., p. 261, 268 and 276 (figures for 1861).

¹³⁴ Galloway 'Population of north Italy', p. 229; the nearest exchange rate (1700) from Cipolla, *Avventura*, p. 117. Taking a later exchange rate (1859) would raise the figure to 0.5 %.

¹³⁵ Farrell-Vinay, 'Welfare provision', pp. 259, 261, 268, 276.

¹³⁶ See section II.

GDP in Italy

For our 1427 GDP estimate of Italy, Malanima's figure of 16 florins per capita was used. His series cover all of northern and central Italy, but his pre-1605 figures are based on Tuscan material and are very close to the average incomes derived directly from the Catasto.¹³⁷ Arguably, a higher figure like Milanovic et. al's 34.6 florins should be preferred, since Malanima includes poor peripheries in his estimate.¹³⁸ However, we chose Malanima's figure because the diocese of Florence includes a large rural population (60%) and many poor *mezzadri* (17%). Moreover, we rely on Malanima's data for all the Italian GDP estimates and we want to be consistent. Nonetheless, it should be remembered, especially for Italy, that cities could have higher incomes than their countryside, giving our urban estimates an upward bias.

For the remainder of our period, Italy consisted of a number of smaller states and relief figures are therefore only available at the level of the city or these states. Following Malanima's advice, we convert his overall GDP per capita figures for central-northern to estimates for the other Italian states through the exchange rates.¹³⁹ The GDP estimates, exchange rates, and population figures are presented in table A.1.

Table A.1 Exchange rates, population, and regional GDP estimates for Italy, 1427–1861.

Region	Year	GDP/cap (£)	Gr. silver Flor. £	Gr. silver local £	Regional GDP/cap.	Pop. (1000s)	Regional GDP (£mil.)
Tuscany	1427	62	8.8	8.8	62	110	
Genoa	1591	172	4.5	8.3	93	65	6.1
Genoa	1696	137	4.5	4.8	127	65	8.3
Piedmont	1750	157	3.9	4.5	136	2,300	313.7
Florence	1794	207	3.8	3.7	207	81	16.8
Veneto	1815	314	3.8	2.4	501	130	65.2
Piedmont	1861	359	3.8	3.8	358	2,900	1,039.5

Footnote references

¹³⁷ Malanima, 'Long decline', p. 198.

¹³⁸ Milanovic, Lindert, and Williamson, 'Pre-industrial inequality', online appendix at <gpih.ucdavis.edu/>.

¹³⁹ Malanima, 'Long decline', pp. 198, 204, 210, 212. Exchange rates from Malanima, *Economia Italiana*, appendix, p. 55; Cipolla, *Avventura*, p. 117 as well as additional figures kindly provided by Paolo Malanima. Inhabitants from Galloway 'Population of north Italy', p. 229 and the online appendix to Malanima, 'Urbanisation' at <http://www.paolomalanima.it/default_file/Page646.htm>.

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Appendix 2 Estimates for England

Gleaning, c. 1800

Around 1800, gleaning accounted for £ 2–3 per poor family per year on average in parishes where the customary right of gleaning existed.¹⁴⁰ Gleaning was less important in the pastoral north and west of England than in the south and east, where it was practised in the majority of parishes. The share of parishes reporting gleaning in 1834 was about 40% in the south-east and 10 % in the north-west, but these are minimums. Based on this minimum figure, 14 % of the rural inhabitants lived in a parish where gleaning was practised. Assuming that the poorest third of the households in a parish gleaned, we find that some 74,000 out of 1.6 million rural households supplemented their income by gleaning. This makes for at least £ 196,000, or 0.08 % of England's £ 246 million GDP.¹⁴¹

Access to pasturing cows on the commons, c. 1800

The most valuable resource the commons provided was the right to pasture up to two cows. To express this right in money, we take the rental value of the land that this right represented. Humphries estimates this cost of grazing a cow at around £ 4 in 1795–1801.¹⁴² Data from Northamptonshire suggest that 40 % of the dwellings had a right of access to common lands. However, 40 % of these dwellings were owned by substantial landowners who cannot be counted among the poor or even middling groups. This means that commons provided relief for 24 % of the households, consisting of poor and middling ones.¹⁴³ Using the figure of 1.6 million rural households, the pasture of one or two cows had a total value of £ 1.5–3 million – an additional 0.6–1.1 % of English GDP (this is a maximum figure, since some regions did not have these rights, or only to a lesser extent).¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ King, 'Customary rights', pp. 462–465; Humphries, 'Enclosures', p. 35.

¹⁴¹ De Vries, *European urbanization*; Broadberry et al., 'British economic growth'; county population shares from Eden, *State of the poor*; Broadberry et al., 'English medieval population'.

¹⁴² Humphries, 'Enclosures', pp. 26–7.

¹⁴³ Shaw-Taylor, 'Parliamentary enclosure', pp. 651–2.

¹⁴⁴ As a check to this figure, we can calculate the amount of land the pasture of these cows required. Following Humphries, 'Enclosures', 27, one cow required 3 acres, meaning that all 600,000–1,000,000 cows required 1.8–3.6 million acres of land, which is compatible with the estimate of 4.9 million acres of common land in 1800 by Allen, 'English and Welsh agriculture', p. 28, table 1.

Figure 1

Poor relief in England as a percentage of GDP

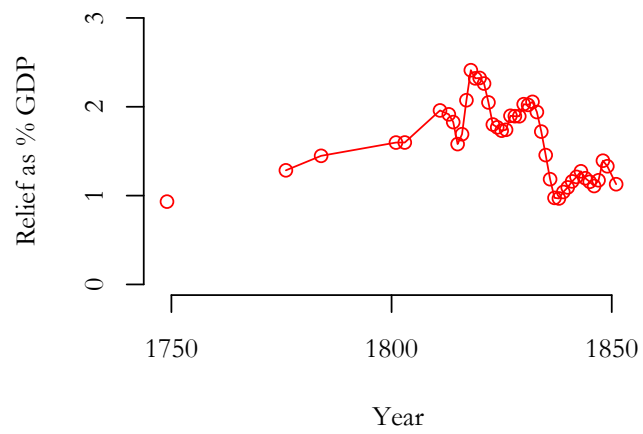


Figure 2

Tentative reconstruction of various types of formalised poor relief per country as a percentage of GDP, based on table 2. Circles indicate lower bound, arrows heads indicate our upper bound estimates. Trend is constructed with LOESS smoothing based on lower and upper bounds.

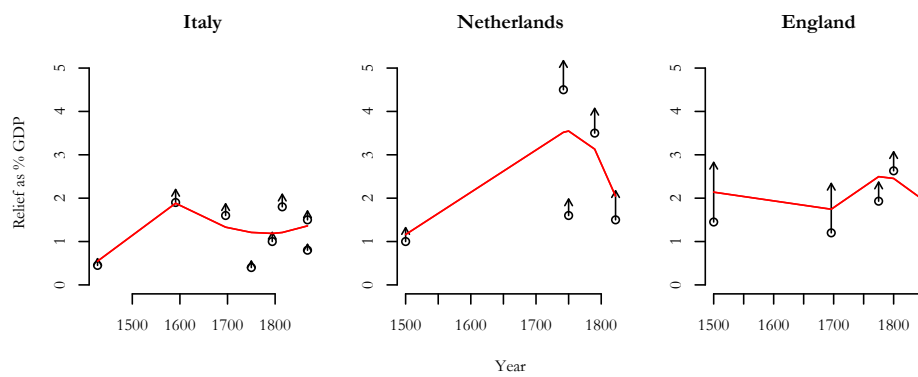


Table 1. Social spending and GDP in Italian regions, 1868.

Region	Per capita GDP 1868	Total expenses (1000s)	Expenses / GDP	Relief / GDP
Liguria	399	11248	1.3 %	1 %
Umbria	387	4035	0.4 %	0.2 %
Campania	367	19645	0.6 %	0.3 %
Lombardia	360	8397	1.8 %	1.2 %
Emilia	350	1886	1.2 %	0.7 %
Piemonte	338	1207	1.2 %	0.9 %
Toscana	335	11665	1.8 %	1.5 %
Sicilia	328	899	0.4 %	0.2 %
Sardegna	325	6025	0.1 %	0.1 %
Puglie	316	1546	0.4 %	0.2 %
Marche	304	282	1.2 %	0.8 %
Basilicata	269	330	0.2 %	0.1 %
Abruzzi e Molise	247	2916	0.3 %	0.1 %
Calabrie	239	258	0.1 %	0.1 %

Sources: Relief figures: Maestri, *Italia economica*, pp. 153–158; GDP: Daniele and Malanima, 'Prodotto delle regioni', p. 311.

Table 2

Tentative reconstruction of various types of formalised poor relief per country as a percentage of GDP (interpolations and guesstimates for missing observations are placed in [])

Region	N-C-Italy	N-C-Italy	N-C-Italy	Italy
Year	1430	1640	1790	1868
Institutions	0.45	1.75	1.1	0.8
Direct bequests	[0.05]	[0.2]	[0.1]	[0.1]
Taxes or poor rates	—	—	—	—
Commons	[0.1]	[0.1]	[0.1]	[0.05]
Gleanings	[0.01]	[0.01]	[0.01]	[0.01]
Tithes	[?]	[?]	[?]	[?]
Total	0.5[−0.6]	1.8[−2.0]	1.1[−1.3]	0.8[−0.9]

Region	w. Netherlands	w. Netherlands	Netherlands
Year	1500	1760	1820
Institutions	1	3.2	1.5
Direct bequests	[0.1]	[0.3]	[0.2]
Taxes or poor rates	0	[0]	[0.3]
Commons	[0.2]	[0.2]	[0.2]
Gleanings	[0.02]	[0.02]	[0.02]
Tithes	0	0	0
Total	1[−1.3]	3.2[−3.7]	1.5[−2.2]

Region	England	England	England	England
Year	1500	1700	1790	1850
Institutions	0.80	0.4	[0.4]	0.1
Direct bequests	0.45	[0.04]	[0.04]	[0.01]
Taxes or poor rates	0.2	0.8	1.35	1.1
Commons	[1.25]	[1.00]	<0.85	<0.6
Gleanings	[0.13]	[0.1]	>0.08	>0.06
Tithes	[?]	[?]	[?]	[?]
Total	1.5[−2.8]	1.2[−2.3]	2.3[−2.7]	1.9[−1.9]

Table 3: Levels of GDP/capita and income inequality (Gini coefficient)

Region	Year	Upper bound of relief as share of GDP	GDP per cap. (in \$ of 1990)	Gini	Urbanisation rate (> 5000 inhabitants)
Tuscany	1427	0.6	1,619	46.1	20
England	1500	2.9	1,134	–	3
Holland	1561	1.3	2,662	56	45
England and Wales	1688	2.4	1,418	45.0	11
Holland	1732	3.7	2,105	61.1	60
England & Wales	1759	2.9	1,876	45.9	19
N. Italy	1800	1.4	1,336	–	18
England & Wales	1801	3.0	2,200	51.5	23
Netherlands	1808	2.4	2,609	57	29

Sources: Milanovic et al., ‘Pre-industrial inequality’; Malanima, ‘Long decline’; Van Leeuwen and Van Zanden, ‘Persistent’; Broadberry et al., ‘British economic growth’; Bolt and Van Zanden, ‘Re-estimating growth’; Van Bavel and Van Zanden, ‘Jump-start’; De Vries and Van der Woude, *Nederland*, p. 604. Further urbanisation rates kindly provided by Eltjo Buringh, d.d. 22 April 2013.