

*Critical History of Poverty*

MR. MORIN, in the memoirs of the French Academy, has formed a little history of Poverty, which I abridge.

The writers on the genealogies of the gods have not noticed this deity's, though admitted as such in the pagan heaven, while she has had temples and altars on earth. The allegorical Plato has pleasingly narrated, that at the feast which Jupiter gave on the birth of Venus, Poverty modestly stood at the gate of the palace to gather the fragments of the celestial banquet; when she observed the god of riches, inebriated with nectar, roll out of the heavenly residence, and passing into the Olympian gardens, throw himself on a vernal bank. She seized this opportunity to become familiar with the god. The frolicsome deity honoured her with his caresses; and from this amour sprung the god of Love, who resembles his father in jollity and mirth, and his mother in his nudity. The allegory is ingenious. The union of poverty with riches must inevitably produce the most delightful of pleasures.

The golden age, however, had but the duration of a flower; when it finished, poverty began to appear. The ancestors of the human race, if they did not meet her face to face, knew her in a partial degree; the vagrant Cain encountered her. She was firmly established in

the patriarchal age. We hear of merchants who publicly practised the commerce of vending slaves, which indicates the utmost degree of poverty. She is distinctly marked by Job: this holy man protests, that he had nothing to reproach himself with respecting the poor, for he had assisted them in their necessities.

In the Scriptures, legislators paid great attention to their relief. Moses, by his wise precautions, endeavoured to soften the rigours of this unhappy state. The division of lands, by tribes and families; the septennial jubilees; the regulation to bestow at the harvest time a certain portion of all the fruits of the earth for those families who were in want; and the obligation of his moral law to love one's neighbour as one's self; were so many mounds erected against the inundations of poverty. The Jews under their Theocracy had few or no mendicants. Their kings were unjust; and rapaciously seizing on inheritances which were not their right, increased the numbers of the poor. From the reign of David there were oppressive governors, who devoured the people as their bread. It was still worse under the foreign powers of Babylon, of Persia, and the Roman emperors. Such were the extortions of their publicans, and the avarice of their governors, that the number of

mendicants dreadfully augmented; and it was probably for that reason that the opulent families consecrated a tenth part of their property for their succour, as appears in the time of the evangelists. In the preceding ages no more was given, as their casuists assure us, than the fortieth or thirtieth part; a custom which this unfortunate nation still practise. If there are no poor of their nation where they reside, they send it to the most distant parts. The Jewish merchants make this charity a regular charge in their transactions with each other; and at the close of the year render an account to the poor of their nation.

By the example of Moses, the ancient legislators were taught to pay a similar attention to the poor. Like him they published laws respecting the division of lands; and many ordinances were made for the benefit of those whom fires, inundations, wars, or bad harvests had reduced to want. Convinced that *idleness* more inevitably introduced poverty than any other cause, it was rigorously punished; the Egyptians made it criminal, and no vagabonds or mendicants were suffered under any pretence whatever. Those who were convicted of slothfulness, and still refused to labour for the public when labour was offered to them, were punished with death. The Egyptian task-masters observed that the Israelites

were an idle nation, and obliged them to furnish bricks for the erection of those famous pyramids, which are probably the works of men who otherwise had remained vagabonds and mendicants.

The same spirit inspired Greece. Lycurgus would not have in his republic either *poor* or *rich*: they lived and laboured in common. As in the present times, every family has its stores and cellars, so they had public ones, and distributed the provisions according to the ages and constitutions of the people. If the same regulation was not precisely observed by the Athenians, the Corinthians, and the other people of Greece, the same maxim existed in full force against idleness.

According to the laws of Draco, Solon, &c., a conviction of wilful poverty was punished with the loss of life. Plato, more gentle in his manners, would have them only banished. He calls them enemies of the state; and pronounces as a maxim, that where there are great numbers of mendicants, fatal revolutions will happen; for as these people have nothing to lose, they plan opportunities to disturb the public repose.

The ancient Romans, whose universal object was the public prosperity, were not indebted to Greece on this head. One of the principal occupations of their censors was to keep a watch on the vagabonds. Those who were

condemned as incorrigible sluggards were sent to the mines, or made to labour on the public edifices. The Romans of those times, unlike the present race, did not consider the *far niente* as an occupation: they were convinced that their liberalities were ill-placed in bestowing them on such men. The little republics of the *bees* and the *ants* were often held out as an example: and the last, particularly where Virgil says, that they have elected overseers who correct the sluggards.

“—— Pars agmina cogunt,  
Castigantque moras.”

And if we may trust the narratives of our travellers, the *beavers* pursue this regulation more rigorously and exactly than even these industrious societies. But their rigour, although but animals, is not so barbarous as that of the ancient Germans; who, Tacitus informs us, plunged the idlers and vagabonds in the thickest mire of their marshes, and left them to perish by a kind of death which resembled their inactive indispositions.

Yet, after all, it was not inhumanity that prompted the ancients thus severely to chastise idleness; they were induced to it by a strict equity; and it would be doing them injustice to suppose, that it was thus they treated those *unfortunate poor*, whose indigence was oc-

casioned by infirmities, by age, or unforeseen calamities. Every family constantly assisted its branches to save them from being reduced to beggary; which to them appeared worse than death. The magistrates protected those who were destitute of friends, or incapable of labour. When Ulysses was disguised as a mendicant, and presented himself to Eurymachus, this prince observing him to be robust and healthy, offered to give him employment, or otherwise to leave him to his ill fortune. When the Roman emperors, even in the reigns of Nero and Tiberius, bestowed their largesses, the distributors were ordered to exempt those from receiving a share whose bad conduct kept them in misery; for that it was better the lazy should die with hunger than be fed in idleness.

Whether the police of the ancients was more exact, or whether they were more attentive to practise the duties of humanity, or that slavery served as an efficacious corrective of idleness; it clearly appears how little was the misery, and how few the numbers of their poor. This they did, too, without having recourse to hospitals.

At the establishment of Christianity, when the apostles commanded a community of wealth among their disciples, the miseries of the poor became alleviated in a greater degree. If they did not absolutely live to-

gether, as we have seen religious orders, yet the rich continually supplied their distressed brethren: but matters greatly changed under Constantine. This prince published edicts in favour of those Christians who had been condemned in the preceding reigns to slavery, to the mines, the galleys, or prisons. The church felt an inundation of prodigious crowds of these miserable men, who brought with them urgent wants and corporeal infirmities. The Christian families were then not numerous; they could not satisfy these claimants. The magistretes protected them: they built spacious hospitals, under different titles, for the sick, the aged, the invalids, the widows, and orphans. The emperors, and the most eminent personages, were seen in these hospitals, examining the patients; they assisted the helpless; they dressed the wounded. This did so much honour to the new religion that Julian the Apostate introduced this custom among the pagans. But the best things are seen continually perverted.

These retreats were found insufficient. Many slaves, proud of the liberty they had just recovered, looked on them as prisons; and under various pretexts, wandered about the country. They displayed with art the scars of their former wounds, and exposed the imprinted marks of their chains. They found thus a lucrative profession

in begging, which had been interdicted by the laws. The profession did not finish with them: men of an untoward, turbulent, and licentious disposition gladly embraced it. It spread so wide that the succeeding emperors were obliged to institute new laws and individuals were allowed to seize on these mendicants for their slaves and perpetual vassals: a powerful preservative against this disorder. It is observed in almost every part of the world, but ours; and prevents that populace of beggary which disgraces Europe. China presents us with a noble example. No beggars are seen loitering in that country. All the world are occupied, even to the blind and the lame; and only those who are incapable of labour live at the public expense. What is done *there* may also be performed *here*. Instead of that hideous, importunate, idle, licentious poverty, as pernicious to the police as to morality, we should see the poverty of the earlier ages, humble, modest, frugal, robust, industrious, and laborious. Then, indeed, the fable of Plato might be realized: Poverty may be embraced by the god of Riches; and if she did not produce the voluptuous offspring of Love, she would become the fertile mother of Agriculture, and the ingenious parent of the Arts and Manufactures.