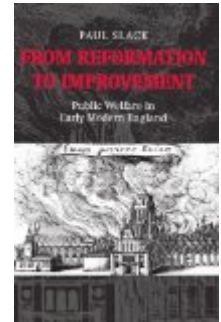


Paul Slack. *From Reformation to Improvement: Public Welfare in Early Modern England.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. viii + 179 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-820661-3.



Reviewed by Joseph P. Ward

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In this book, based largely upon his 1995 Ford Lectures at the University of Oxford, Paul Slack surveys the evolution of ideas about public welfare in early modern England. With a dual focus on policies developed by the national government and on initiatives taken locally by towns, parishes, guilds, and voluntary associations, Slack addresses the "intriguing paradox" of early modern English responses to social welfare: "It is necessary to think of state power and community power in symbiosis, each dependent upon and supporting the other" rather than in competition, as happened elsewhere in Europe (pp.161-62). Readers of the author's earlier works will recognize several familiar topics such as poverty, disease, and urban growth. While rehearsing some of his previous research, Slack transcends it by offering a survey of public welfare policies that serious students will find a frequently stimulating guide to a perennially important and surprisingly interesting subject.

Slack begins with a discussion of those who sought to promote the "common weal" during the early decades of the sixteenth century. Influenced

by humanism and religious reform, three generations of England's elite, both provincial and metropolitan, pursued a variety of paternalistic policies directed against threats to public welfare ranging from dearth and disease to immorality and filthy streets. Slack acknowledges that they were by no means the first English social reformers, but argues that it was only during the early sixteenth century that "projects, policies, and civic activity for welfare purposes all came together for the first time under a single banner -- that of the common weal -- and it was carried forward by combined (and sometimes contending) forces of unusual variety and determination" (p.5). For Slack's purposes this movement was crucial because "It was recognizably the first of a number of similarly constituted cycles of innovation and diffusion" (pp.5-6).

The next of these cycles Slack considers is the quest, often led by preachers, to make England's towns more godly from about 1570 to the Interregnum. After a quick survey of the trajectory of this movement --which began in East Anglia and gradually spread to the south-west -- Slack com-

compares the experiences of ten large towns that had at least one episode of godly reform with ten that underwent reform of a more secular nature. He finds that Puritanism may largely explain the speed with which some town governments pursued reform. Slack's discussion addresses many of the central issues energizing research into this topic, such as the interplay of ideology and economic necessity as motives for reform, but it offers too little analysis of why Puritanism came to have a powerful influence among the magistrates of some towns. Far more compelling in this regard is Muriel McClendon's examination of Norwich. While sharing Slack's conclusion that Puritanism can account for the rapid implementation of a godly agenda by the town's magistrates, McClendon's detailed research into more than a century of the town's history enables her to connect the magisterial pursuit of reform to a sudden change of religious affiliations among Norwich's aldermen after 1558 (Muriel C. McClendon, *The Quiet Reformation: Magistrates and the Emergence of Protestantism in Tudor Norwich* [Stanford University Press, 1999]).

After examining godly towns, Slack turns from local, community-based initiatives to national efforts from the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries. He begins by uncovering the deep roots of royal social policy, with Burghley deliberately following Wolsey's precedents and James's servants mainly plowing "in grooves well worn by Elizabethan practice" (p.60). During the revolutionary decades of the middle of the seventeenth century, a new generation of reformers came to the fore, and here Slack focuses on Samuel Hartlib and his circle, who championed a far more sympathetic approach to the plight of the poor than had earlier reformers. Toward the end of the century and the beginning of the next, Parliament increasingly became the focus of reform efforts, especially through its involvement in the establishment of local Corporations of the Poor, although attempts to revive earlier, godly ef-

forts at sweeping national reform foundered in the new age of party politics.

In the absence of a national reform movement, local voluntary bodies took the initiative. Encouraged by groups such as the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, localities developed the hospitals, schools, and workhouses that would long remain prominent features of community-based welfare efforts. At the same time, Slack maintains that godly reformers were prevented from regaining their earlier dominance over towns "now firmly dependent on gentry support" (p.115), although Catherine Patterson's analysis of urban government in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries makes a very strong case for such dependence far earlier (Catherine F. Patterson, *Urban Patronage in Early Modern England: Corporate Boroughs, the Landed Elite, and the Crown, 1580-1640* [Stanford University Press, 1999]).

Slack's concluding chapter argues that reforming impulses cannot be attributed primarily to economic factors. By focusing on the importance of ideological influences that have their roots in the civic humanism and theological reform of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Slack skillfully highlights the importance of considering English approaches to public welfare in their European context. Throughout the period he considers, Slack finds the crucial features of English welfare policy to have been "the dominance of the parish, an insistence on labour, and a strong voluntary sector" (p.154), all supported by a unique combination of local and centralized relief efforts that encouraged "a strengthening of the kind of civic consciousness which came from wide participation in the shaping and delivery of public welfare" (p.165).

In this way, Slack illustrates the integrity of a period stretching from the early sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries. This is in contrast to Marjorie McIntosh's recent call for historians of English social regulation to reconsider traditional

chronologies because of the similarities she found among policies pursued from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries (Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehavior in England, 1370-1600* [Cambridge University Press, 1998]). In addition to its breadth, learning, and ambition, its perspective on the nature of the period is one of the most compelling reasons that Slack's book should find a place on early modern social history reading lists.

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