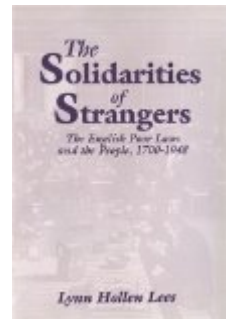


Lynn Hollen Lees. *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xii + 373 pp. \$64.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-57261-3.



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This book presents a broad overview and interpretation of the English poor laws from the late seventeenth century up to the early twentieth century. In the introduction Lees states that, despite the large literature on the poor laws, "we know relatively little about how such institutions operated, how their practices changed over time, and how they were regarded by ordinary people" (p. 9). Her book is a very good first step toward filling that gap in the literature.

The book is divided into three roughly equal parts. Part One (Chapters 1-3) deals with poor relief up to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. While most of the discussion is based on secondary sources, Lees nicely summarizes the recent literature on the poor law, and offers her own well-reasoned interpretations of the role of poor relief in the lives of the poor. Lees contends that, at least before 1800, the legitimacy of the poor laws was accepted both by recipients and by local taxpayers. Members of the working class might not have liked applying for relief, but they often were forced to turn to the poor law during bad times, and they strongly defended their right

to public assistance. And while taxpayers, then as now, grumbled about the level of their taxes, they saw the payment of poor relief to the unfortunate of the community as a duty. Sometime around 1800, however, the middle class began to question the legitimacy of poor relief and to view applicants for relief as undeserving. According to Lees, this change in opinion largely was a result of the sharp increase in relief expenditures and numbers on relief that began in the late eighteenth century, and it was accelerated by the writings of Thomas Malthus and other classical economists claiming that the poor laws actually created pauperism. The middle class began to feel that the role of the poor law was not simply to relieve the poor but also to discipline and reform them.

Part Two deals with the early years of the New Poor Law, from 1834 to 1860. Chapter 4 contains a discussion of the activities of the Royal Poor Law Commission, its condemnation of current welfare practices, and its recommendations for implementing the New Poor Law. Chapter 5 examines the responses of the poor to the New Poor Law. While the middle classes had come to

view acceptance of relief as a sign of moral failings, the working class continued to regard public relief as an important form of social insurance. Lees rejects the argument of some historians that workers hated the poor laws, noting that it is necessary "to distinguish between the rejection by the poor of specific welfare institutions [such as the workhouse] and their adamant insistence upon their own entitlement to parish relief" (p. 165). Chapter 6, on the local administration of poor relief from 1834 to 1870, is the best chapter in the book. Lees convincingly shows that the official statistics of poor relief for this period do not accurately measure the incidence of relief or the type of relief recipients. She calculates that between 1850 and 1870, 10 to 13 percent of the population of England and Wales received poor relief each year; over a three-year period perhaps a quarter of the population received assistance. Despite a boom in the construction of workhouses, most paupers continued to receive outdoor relief. In order to determine the composition of the "pauper host," Lees studied the settlement examinations for three London parishes and six towns -- Bedford, Cambridge, Cheltenham, Shrewsbury, Southampton, and York -- for the years around 1850. While her sample of provincial towns is not representative of urban Britain in 1850 -- it includes no large cities and no northern industrial towns -- the data she collects provide a more detailed, and almost certainly more accurate, picture of applicants for and recipients of relief than do the official statistics. She finds that large numbers of prime-age males continued to apply for relief in the provincial towns during the 1840s, and that a majority of those assisted were granted outdoor relief. Adult females were more likely to get relief in counties where the demand for their labor was relatively high, and yet few unemployed women appear in the account books Lees examined. She concludes that women who applied for relief told overseers stories that were likely to produce assistance, stressing widowhood, deser-

tion, sickness, or pregnancy rather than lack of work.

Part Three covers the period from 1860 until the official repeal of the poor laws in 1948. Lees maintains that the late nineteenth century saw a decline in the legitimacy of the poor laws in the eyes of both the middle and working classes. The crusade against outrelief in the 1870s led to a sharp decline in numbers on relief, as cities throughout Britain refused outdoor relief to both able-bodied and non-able bodied paupers, and large numbers of applicants for relief refused to enter workhouses. Lees's discussion of the crusade against outrelief and the Charity Organization Society in Chapter 8 is disappointing. She has little to say about the causes of the crusade, and she ignores the important work on the subject by Mary MacKinnon and Robert Humphreys. Aside from a brief discussion of case records for Stepney, in East London, for 1876-89, there is no detailed examination of relief practices at the local level to match her study of settlement examinations in 1850. In Chapter 9, Lees argues that by the end of the nineteenth century public assistance had become more avoidable as a result of rising incomes and the availability of private insurance through trade unions and friendly societies. As the demand for assistance declined, workers came to see poor relief as stigmatizing. Chapter 10 examines the decline of the poor law after 1906, and its replacement first by social insurance and then, after World War II, by the welfare state.

While the analysis of late nineteenth century poor relief needs to be supplemented by other sources, there is much to be commended in this book. Especially noteworthy are Lees's discussions of the extent to which the precise methods and generosity of relief were determined by "welfare bargaining" between applicants for relief and local poor law officials, and of the changing attitudes of the working class toward poor relief. Lees also significantly extends our knowledge of how female-headed households were treated un-

der the poor laws, and how the comparative treatment of male and female relief applicants changed over time. Overall, *The Solidarities of Strangers* provides an excellent introduction to the changing nature of the English poor laws over three centuries.

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