Volume Forty 1998
Essays in History
Published by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia.

De Tocqueville, Alexis, *Memoir on Pauperism*, introduced by Gertrude Himmelfarb (Chicago, 1997).

Humphreys, Robert. *Sin, Organized Charity, and the Poor Law in Victorian England* (New York, 1995).

While the term "pauperism" is now outdated, the idea behind it remains important to the discussion of poverty, charity, and the Welfare State at the close of the twentieth century. Since Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher took office, political conservatives have often viewed the Welfare State as being a significant cause of poverty, because, in their opinion, public charity creates an idle and dependent class within society. The publication for the first time as an independent monograph of an English translation of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Memoir on Pauperism*, a work which espouses this very view, and its introduction by the noted conservative historian Gertrude Himmelfarb can, therefore, be expected to attract both those interested in the historical past and in the political present.

Written shortly after his first trip to England in 1833 and presented to the Royal Academic Society of Cherbourg in 1835, Tocqueville's *Memoir* argues that "public charity" encourages dependence, improvidence, and moral degeneration. In addition, "relief as a right," he claimed, depresses wages and productivity, and increases food prices, population, and unemployment. In consequence, Tocqueville strongly supported the expansion of private philanthropy. As such aid was collected voluntarily and distributed on a temporary basis, it would not pauperize its recipients. That said, Tocqueville recognized "not only the utility but the necessity of public charity applied to inevitable evils such as the helplessness of infancy, the decrepitude of old age, sickness, [and] insanity." He even admitted "its temporary usefulness in times of public calamities . . . [as] State alms are then as spontaneous as unforeseen, as temporary as the evil itself." Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Tocqueville doubted that assistance could or should be distributed on the basis of "character." Who, he asked, "would dare to let a poor man die of hunger because it's his own fault that he is dying? Who will hear his cries and reason about his vices?"

Gertrude Himmelfarb in her introductory essay to the *Memoir* argues that Tocqueville's words resonate "in an industrial and even postindustrial society" for one simple reason; we are now attempting "to cope with the consequences Tocqueville foresaw" during the 1830s. Indeed, the existence of a chronically dependent and de-moralized underclass, one effect of state welfare Tocqueville would argue, has led an increasing number of people in Britain and the United States to challenge the entitlement programs enshrined in the Welfare State. Himmelfarb further notes that the trend towards the devolution of authority for the care of the poor in the United States from the national to the state level might eventually leave power in the hands of local officials or, conceivably, even within the private sector. Not that this would, for Himmelfarb, be a bad thing. "If public relief is an invitation both to individual irresponsibility and to an overweening state," she concludes, "Private charity . . . may be the remedy for both." According to Himmelfarb, as private philanthropy is better able to discriminate between the applicants for its relief than a monolithic Welfare State, its resources would be applied to the elevation of the "deserving" poor.

Robert Humphreys' scholarly examination of the Charity Organisation Society should, however, raise real questions about the efficiency of local government and private efforts to relieve the poor. "The Society for Organising Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendacity" founded in Britain in 1869 believed that the poor could be divided between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" through rigorous investigation. Those whose poverty was due to forces beyond their control were to be aided by private philanthropy; the rest were, in an ideal world, to be incarcerated within the Poor Law workhouse. The problem, as the COS saw it, was that private charity and the Poor Law Guardians all too often granted relief indiscriminately; rewarding the "undeserving" in this way promoted shiftlessness and immorality within Victorian society. In consequence, the COS led a crusade against Poor Law outdoor relief and the indiscriminate distribution of private charity, and established a national network of societies to promote their message.

Unfortunately, as Humphreys demonstrates, COS social theory provoked hostility from the poor, the clergy, Poor Law Guardians, many ratepayers, and a large number of philanthropic organizations. Particularly outside of London, the Victorians rejected the COS as extremist. Not surprisingly, both public and private aid continued to be distributed largely on the basis of need, not "character," throughout the Victorian era. Even worse from their perspective, the COS proved unable to provide a practical alternative. When "the anticipated armies of middle-class volunteers failed to materialize, COS provincial visitors were often hard-pressed with little time for compassionate counseling" or for detailed investigation of the applicants for their relief. Some provincial societies, indeed, were forced to hire professional agents to meet their obligations. As a result, the COS made little headway in converting Britain to their vision of how relief should be distributed. Well into the twentieth century "the COS found it necessary to complain just as stridently about the careless profligacy of traditional charities" and the Poor Law as it had initially in 1869.

What these two works make clear is that both Tocqueville in 1835 and the COS toward the end of the nineteenth century labored under the same delusion, that the crux of the Social Problem in Britain lay with the pauperized, not with the poor as a whole. As we have seen, Tocqueville objected to the distribution of state aid to the "able-bodied," not to the young, the old, or to the sick. He realized, in addition, that state welfare was necessary during periods of "public calamities," economic or otherwise. Although the COS wished to relieve the "deserving" through the private sector, its clients were the same as Tocqueville's. Neither Tocqueville nor the COS seemed to realize that the vast majority of those seeking relief on a regular basis *were* "deserving": widows, their children, the sick, the disabled, and the elderly. Although the unemployed and casual laborers often sought relief, most did not do so on a long-term basis. The same might be said of the recipients of welfare in the United States and Great Britain today.

Taken together, Tocqueville and Humphreys reveal several of the most important lessons that can be learned from the study of nineteenth century pauperism. First, although there is always a danger that indiscriminate relief might de-moralize a few stray individuals, neither public nor private relief typically pauperizes the poor. Second, while private charity can be both effective and morally-elevating, it is rarely available in sufficient quantities to eliminate economic distress, even when the economy is buoyant. Third, when private resources fail, the state has a moral obligation to step in to aid the disabled, the sick, the aged, children, and the chronically unemployed. Finally, it is economic prosperity, not government welfare programs or private philanthropy, that has the ability to lift the bulk of the impoverished out of poverty.

Robert Haggard