

Hard and Unreal Advice: Mothers, Social Science and the Victorian Poverty Experts

Review Number:

759

Publish date:

Sunday, 31 May, 2009

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ISBN:

9780230201897

Date of Publication:

2008

Price:

£50.00

Pages:

229pp.

Publisher:

Palgrave Macmillan

Place of Publication:

Basingstoke

Reviewer:

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This is a fresh and perceptive work which seeks to examine the assumptions and methodology of Victorian and Edwardian poverty experts. Professor Martin reviews research undertaken by such familiar figures as T. R. Malthus, Edwin Chadwick, Helen Bosanquet, Charles Booth and Beatrice Webb; through this, Martin also aims to provide a structural critique of the work of more recent poverty experts such as Edward Banfield and Charles Murray: 'What Murray is doing, in a very real sense, is Victorian social science. Anyone familiar with the Victorian social science of poverty recognizes immediately in Murray's analysis of public welfare its typical concerns, techniques, assumptions, blind spots and behavioral models' (p. vii).⁽¹⁾

Recent nuanced reviews of the development of sociological practice, sensitive to issues of gender and ethnicity, have been complemented by exciting works of cultural-historical scholarship, and Professor Martin's book contributes to these fields. While she develops a cogent thesis about the 'personal defects' theory of poverty and the intellectual advancement of poverty studies, she does not engage explicitly with some significant British cultural scholarship: it would be interesting to see how *Hard and Unreal Advice*, which makes effective use of the work of Seth Koven and Mary Poovey, would utilize the arguments of Frank Mort or Eileen Yeo.⁽²⁾ Martin makes no direct reference to the work of José Harris, whose position, for example, on the Edwardian Royal Commission and the development of professional casework, chimes with her own.⁽³⁾ However, notwithstanding these (essentially British) grievances, Martin sets her material to work with insight and concision, aiming to examine *particular assumptions* within *particular models* of social investigation. To achieve this, she deals with approaches to *a specific subdivision* of welfare policy: she has selected for study that which she sees as prompting the most emotional discussion and revealing the

least scrutinized assumptions about the behaviour of the poor – support for impoverished women with dependent children. She acknowledges that the ideas which she examines were not universal, nor were they uncontested – but stresses that they were popular and that they still inform much debate on welfare policy, which is why we should pay close attention to them.

In chapter one, Martin tells us that, ‘Much of this volume will be concerned with the role of the emerging social sciences in the construction, maintenance and evaluation of the Victorian Poor Law.’ (p.12) The key frames of reference for Martin’s study are the Royal Commissions on the Poor Law of 1832–4 and 1905–9, the latter being composed of poverty experts trained in a social scientific tradition developed in the interim. Rejecting the dichotomy of individualism versus collectivism which has marked much scholarship on late Victorian social theory in her search for ‘the logic behind the apparent illogic that characterized Victorian and Edwardian poverty policy’ (p. 8), Martin emphasizes the common ground between the Majority and Minority Reports of the Edwardian Royal Commission, and of their shared similarity to the report of 1834 in an assumption that there is something fundamentally wrong with poor people besides a lack of money: ‘The key to understanding this continuity is to ask a very different question from the ones historians of the Victorian poor law have always asked ... [W]e shall ask ... what did the poverty experts of the period know about the poor, and how did they know it?’ (p. 7) In order to answer these questions, Martin lays the groundwork for her contention that comparable, customary cultural assumptions and irrationality connect the investigations and conclusions of these commissions. In chapter two, she considers their composition and gives a brief review of their findings, noting involvement by many members of the Edwardian Commission with the Charity Organisation Society (COS), a body committed to the suppression of indiscriminate almsgiving within an overwhelmingly moralistic interpretation of poverty.

In chapter three, Martin steps back to consider the impact on the configuration of English poverty research of ‘popular Protestantism.’ Having discussed the ‘puritan asceticism’ informing *Pilgrim’s Progress* in which bodily suffering is viewed as trifling in the context of the soul’s journey, Martin focuses upon Samuel Smiles’s *Self Help*, making this crucial observation: ‘So thoroughly assimilated as to be more or less invisible, Bunyan’s imagery of the moral journey of Christian has become the topography of the Victorian narrative of a life’s progress.’ (p. 24) Martin surveys a nonconformist view of man’s depravity, and a dominant evangelical belief in general providence, bound up with hostility to any social policy viewed as interfering with God’s operation of the world. These ideas, she asserts, conditioned not only the thinking of general providential Protestants involved with the 1832–4 Royal Commission such as Nassau William Senior, but the reasoning of apparently secular late Victorian poverty experts, who transformed theological concepts into social scientific ones: from providence to ‘natural law’ to political economy and science. Martin’s list of those 19th-century poverty experts drawn from a Unitarian background, and the discussion of Unitarian influence on the COS, is suggestive: Martin recasts the Organisation’s attacks on the activities of the Salvation Army in terms of doctrinal differences between ‘general’ and ‘special’ providential traditions in Protestantism. She relates the arguments of the COS and others against indiscriminate almsgiving to ‘religious’ habits of mind and outlines an association between Bunyan’s equation of physical hardship with spiritual attainment, the educational dissemination of notions of self help, the idea of ‘character,’ and the primacy of the will ubiquitous in Victorian thought and stressed in philosophical idealism. Religious notions ‘invisible’ to social scientists, Martin asserts, made a vital contribution to a Victorian poverty theory that did not take material deprivation very seriously and was more concerned with pauperism and indiscriminate almsgiving than with mass poverty. Clearly this is a different-though-related discussion to that concerning the religious context of British idealism, and provides intriguing reading in the context of arguments for the communitarian and the flexible in late Victorian social thought.(4)

In chapter four, Martin considers the reform of poor relief in the 1830s in relation to the Political Economy Club, utilitarianism and the ideas of Malthus. In order to highlight bias and illogic in the testimony before the Royal Commission of 1832, she examines statements relating to the provisions governing bastardy, exploring the tensions between Malthusian premises (that people marry without forethought) and assumptions of calculation in response to the availability of payments. Employing the established abstract concept of *homo economicus*, Martin posits ‘economic woman’, perfidious speculator, motivated only by

economic considerations, as a dominant representation of poor women in evidence before the Commission. The figure of 'economic woman', concludes Martin, was not recognized by Members of Parliament, who rejected the Royal Commission's remedy of overhauling the bastardy provisions to place full responsibility for illegitimate children on their mothers. Reviewing the significance accorded by witnesses and Commissioners to the provision of family allowances in the decision-making processes of impoverished women, Martin contends that the conduct of the poor was interpreted according to moral presupposition rather than empirical observation, this presupposition being entirely consistent with Protestant notional associations between sin, idleness and poverty.

Elements of her discussion of the complex cultural connections made between vice, poverty and disease, of the problems of obtaining and deploying data and of bias in survey design, will be familiar to those acquainted with the work of diverse cultural historians. The core achievement of this book, however, is its distinct synthesis of material in a well defined narrative of the conditioning of apparently secular ideas by 'hidden' religiously-informed assumptions. In chapter five, Martin traces the history of the Public Health Movement, the Statistical Movement and the Social Science Movement, utilizing material by such apparently dissimilar figures as Edwin Chadwick and Seebohm Rowntree to tease out shared underlying beliefs and their significance to the structure and methods of social investigation. Highlighting the organization of data in Chadwick's *Sanitary Report*, Martin states, 'Late Victorian research on the health of the poor displays the legacy of Chadwick's choices: only that which takes place in the home is relevant to health' (p. 68). Martin's discussion of the COS discloses the assumptions of moral deficiency which underlie professional casework: casework thus figures in her thesis as evidence of continuing religiously-derived structures of understanding within social investigation.

Chapter six provides a clear and concise discussion of the use within poverty studies of ideas and metaphors derived from the biological sciences. Martin stresses the plasticity and vagueness of biological metaphor and the role of such metaphor in shaping perceptions.⁽⁵⁾ She locates notions of heredity, recapitulation and the common foundational concepts of evolutionary anthropology and contemporary social theory within a multi-disciplinary context, stressing the compatibility of 'hidden' religious and secular notions of sin and savagery, of morality, political economy and biology. Not least, she argues, viewing the poor as savage or childlike reinforced the 'therapeutic casework' model of social intervention, which inferred the need for superintendence of the pauperized from their social status rather than from empirical analysis.

In chapter seven, Martin considers the (pseudo) 'scientific' methods employed by Victorian and Edwardian social investigators, developing yet further her foundational analysis of the flawed practice of the 1832 Commission in terms of an unsound 'ancestry' of much subsequent poverty research: *a priori* theorizing, based on unexamined assumptions, defines the focus of investigation so as to preclude unwelcome evidence, particularly in evaluating conduct in terms of individual choice rather than in terms of social and economic constraints upon choice. Martin's discussion of the use of 'ideal types' by Helen Bosanquet and by more recent authors such as Charles Murray illustrates how speculation can read as if it were the outcome of practical investigation. Martin also reviews issues of data selection and use, drawing parallels between the practices of the 1832 Royal Commission and the 1904 Inter-departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Likewise, she traces a continuance of bias, particularly with regard to survey design and selection of witnesses, between the 1832-4 and 1905-9 Poor Law Commissions. Attempts to cancel bias, and the limits of such attempts, by Charles Booth, Beatrice Webb and Maude Pember Reeves, are critiqued in the context of profound assumptions of the defective characteristics of impoverished people.

The author asserts the dominance of this personal defects theory in England and America. A poverty survey undertaken by the COS of New York in 1908 attempted to include all factors present in the cases on its rolls without assuming their significance or agency in the poverty of those concerned. Nonetheless, as Martin relates, the importance of 'defect of character' was purposely inflated in the published findings.⁽⁶⁾ Martin then examines Helen Bosanquet's review of Reeves's *Round About a Pound A Week*, a study of working-class London housewives which had attempted to proceed from evidence to conclusions. She identifies the basis of Bosanquet counter-arguments as unsupported supposition about the character and motivations of poor people. Martin sees the response of theorists such as Bosanquet to accumulations of data from studies

by Booth, Reeves, and Rowntree, which indicated that poverty might be owing to circumstances beyond the control of the poor, in terms of the establishment of befuddling ‘loops of cultural transmission that confound cause and effect’ (p. 133).

Chapter eight consists of three case studies in *a priori* 19th-century social science, through which Martin continues her fruitful strategy of focusing on sociological approaches to the behaviour of impoverished women. The case studies treat analyses of ‘uneconomic’ purchasing by East End mothers, maternal ‘ignorance’ on the part of slum mothers, and a number of Victorian infant life assurance scares in which poor mothers were assumed to be killing or neglecting their children on a large scale. Drawing on witness testimony before the 1904 Inter-departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration as well as the work of such distinct social investigators as Seebohm Rowntree and Helen Bosanquet, Martin demonstrates that theories relating to ‘reckless improvidence’ and careless or ignorant parenting by slum mothers ignored the constraints of low earnings, insanitary housing and social custom. As a result, poor families’ attempts to maintain social respectability were misconstrued as tokens of callousness or improvidence. Martin traces the frequent association of poverty and laziness invoked by such figures as Octavia Hill, Beatrice Webb and Helen Bosanquet – all hailing from Unitarian backgrounds – to an English Protestant tradition equating poverty with idleness, ignorance and sin. Charles Booth’s blending of empirical observation and ‘moral’ interpretation has been discussed by various scholars, but here the agnostic Booth’s particular and irrational consideration of laziness as a plausible cause for prostitution is located in a well-established Puritan tradition (Martin points to the strong Unitarian influence in Booth’s upbringing). The analysis of the Victorian infant life assurance scares revisits the same model of purposeful and heartless ‘economic woman’ which Martin found to be present in testimony before the 1832–4 Poor Law Commission. The same inconsistency develops in the case of the assurance scares: the irrational spendthrift, devoid of foresight, is simultaneously capable of long-term financial speculation.

In chapter nine, the author’s consideration of questions which 19th-century poverty experts did *not* ask serves further to expose the unexamined status of assumptions regarding, for example, significantly greater consumption of alcohol among the poorest in society, and the supposed lack of commitment of the poor to the work ethic. A telling disinterest on the part of Victorian social investigators in the drinking habits and work-related motivation of other social classes has left us with insufficient evidence for comparison. To highlight still further the structural bias of Victorian social science, Martin considers an experimental counter-hypothesis to the personal defects theory: ‘[That] Immoral behavior causes poverty only among people who are economically vulnerable in the first place. For most of the poor, immoral behavior is either a secondary cause of poverty, a result of poverty, or not involved’ (p. 163). Martin suggests that if this assumption were made, different factors would be considered and in consequence entirely different policies would be indicated. She then explores possible explanations for the loyalty of so many Victorian and Edwardian researchers to the personal defects theory of poverty. In connection with what she calls the Conspiracy Theory, in which approaches to poverty would be an unproblematic exercise in social control, she acknowledges that dissenting perspectives were heard and published during the 19th century. Vitally, not everyone who believed in the personal defects theory had an economic stake in it. For Martin, what she calls the ‘comforting ideas theory’, *in conjunction with* forms of cultural inertia and the usefulness to the status quo of particular approaches to poverty, serve as a feasible explanation of widespread acceptance of harsh dealings with the poor: the discarding of notions of divine providence and economic fairness would come at too high a personal and cultural price for most people. Martin then summarizes her core argument in chapter ten, and, having acknowledged that the theorists she has surveyed were among the pioneers of social science, lacking the advantage of established procedures, she turns accusingly to the work of Charles Murray and Edward Banfield, late 20th-century poverty experts in whose studies she identifies the same unexamined assumptions and structures.

This is a bold and timely work of cultural history - albeit those working to specify the communitarian in late 19th-century social thought, and to counter the perceived ‘caricaturing’ of the COS by some social control theorists, may have reservations. It goes almost without saying, too, that those eager for radical welfare reform at the present time will dispute Martin’s analysis. For this reviewer, the academic value of the book

lies in its forthright treatment of religious ideas as just one more category of thought within a particular synthesis of material, and the resulting, at times startling, perspective offered on 19th- (and 20th-) century social scientific method. Clearly Martin does not seek to ‘explain’ Charles Booth and his works reductively, in terms only of his Unitarian upbringing: she seeks to pinpoint and ‘explain’ certain assumptions and structures within Victorian social science, and identifies these elements within the work of Charles Booth, as appropriate. Eschewing ‘straightforward’ social control theories, Martin takes care to locate and examine the ways in which some of the theorists whose work she considers *did* attempt, with varying levels of success, to excise bias. Altogether, this tightly-structured study makes for stimulating and suggestive reading; in historical terms, though accessible, it may prove most beneficial to those already familiar with the (interdisciplinary) territory. Meanwhile, in terms of a combative and thought-provoking contribution to current welfare debate, I suggest that this book merits a much wider audience.

Notes

1. Edward Banfield, *The Unheavenly City Revisited* (Boston, 1974); Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950–1980* (New York, 1994). By ‘blindspots’, Martin is referring to the bias, resulting from unexamined supposition, which she argues structured the focus and methodology of much 19th- and 20th-century social science. Behavioural models constitute the propositions (selective assumptions) employed in the study and interpretation of sociological phenomena.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England Since 1830* (London, 2000, first published 1987); Eileen Janes Yeo, *The Contest for Social Science: Relations and Representations of Gender and Class* (London, 1996).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See José Harris, ‘The Webbs, the Charity Organisation Society and the Ratan Tata Foundation: social policy from the perspective of 1912’, in *The Goals of Social Policy*, ed. Martin Bulmer, Jane Lewis and David Piachaud (London, 1989).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Andrew Vincent and Raymond Plant, *Philosophy, Politics and Citizenship: The Life and Thought of the British Idealists*, (Oxford, 1984), chapters two, six and seven; David Boucher and David Vincent, *British Idealism and Political Theory* (Edinburgh, 2000), chapter one; see also S. M. Den Otter ‘‘The restoration of a citizen mind’’: Bernard Bosanquet and the Charity Organisation Society,’ and Peter Nicholson, ‘Bosanquet and state action’, both in *Bernard Bosanquet and the Legacy of British Idealism*, ed. William Sweet (Toronto, 2007).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. For an excellent complementary discussion, see José Harris, ‘Between civic virtue and social Darwinism’, in *Retrieved Riches: Social Investigation in Britain 1840-1914*, ed. David Englander and Rosemary O’Day (Aldershot, 1995); on this subject both Martin and Harris will be most rewardingly read in conjunction with more uncompromising degenerationist studies such as Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848–c.1914* (Cambridge, 1984); William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel, 1880–1940* (Cambridge, 1994).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Edward T. Devine, *Misery and Its Causes* (New York, 1913, first published 1909).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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