“Controlling the poor and moulding the urban working classes”

‘Applicants to a Casual Ward’ by Luke Fildes
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Chris Matthews looks at two case studies which demonstrate how ‘social control’ by charities trumped kindness when dealing with nineteenth century poverty and morality in England and Wales.

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The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a marked increase in the formation of charities to aid the poor. While charitable works and philanthropy were principally viewed as an aid to provide a helping hand for those in need, it will be argued that they were also seen by the higher ranking members of the social order as a way of controlling the poor and “mould[ing] the urban working classes”. It also provided an opportunity for newly emerging business owners to gain access to those at the very pinnacle of society, obtaining statuses and privileges that would otherwise be unavailable, enabling them to “lay down the law” while providing the opportunity to “hail-fellow with a lord”. Through two case studies of urban areas, it will be seen that “social control” was much in evidence amongst the upper and middle classes, offering the chance, in the words of MP J A Roebuck, “to make the working man as […] civilised a creature as I could make him”.

The catalyst for the nineteenth century growth in charity can be traced to the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act (New Poor Law), in which local guardians were directed to refuse the provision of outdoor relief to able-bodied claimants applying for assistance from their parish. An officer would assess the financial circumstances of each claimant, ensuring that all material goods owned by the applicant were sold to make ends meet. Only once this had been achieved would relief be provided, in the form of indoor relief at the parish workhouse. Workhouses, however, were expensive to build, with many largely rural parishes being more lenient in enforcing the New Poor Law than central government had intended. Between 1840 and 1869, the number of paupers on indoor relief barely changed, fluctuating between 14.3% and 15.5%. However, as the nineteenth century wore on, increasing enforcement of the act by the Local Government Board saw an explosion in the number of charities being established to provide the working classes with different forms of “indoor relief”, most conspicuously in urban areas. By 1861, London alone could claim 640 charities, half of
which had been formed during the first half of the nineteenth century, while the city of Manchester also saw a “large number of voluntary charities” formed during the same period.

It was in nineteenth century Manchester and the surrounding area during the period dubbed the “Cotton Famine” that the element of “social control” became synonymous with charitable deeds. Overproduction in the late 1850s, along with a halving of raw cotton imports due to the American Civil War, had seen an abrupt slump in production by 1862. Understandably, this had a huge impact on the economies of the Lancashire cotton towns surrounding Manchester, most of which were almost entirely dependent upon the cotton trade. By the end of December 1862, some twenty-five per cent of the population of this region were claiming relief, a figure that the New Poor Law could not sustain. Charities therefore became an important provider of assistance. A number of figures from the political and social elites found themselves elevated to the committees of the Central Relief Fund, including Sir James Phillip Kay Shuttleworth, publisher of The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester, a work cited by Engels in his 1845 work Condition of the Working Class in England, and Abel Heywood, Mayor of Manchester and one-time publisher of Poor Man's Guardian, a hugely influential journal responsible for lowering the tax on newspapers enabling their purchase by the working classes. They were joined by local businessmen such as Thomas Ashton, owner of one of the largest industrial concerns in the district, and local mill owner and philanthropist Hugh Mason, demonstrating the opportunities for the “self-made” middle classes to rub shoulders with the great and good of society. It is important to note the background to these individuals, as it demonstrates their understanding of the local working environment, as well as being people that the employees would trust as operating in their interests. It was imperative to the committee members that the unemployed continued to work in some sort of role as it provided “moral guidance” in which “order was maintained”, enabling the
unemployed to spend at least “part of their time in a controlled environment”. Superficially, this could be construed as an act of kindness, as it enabled the poor to earn some money to support their families in an otherwise barren time for the cotton industry. Some of the early conditions, such as the willingness of recipients of relief to work or to attend classes, seem almost an acceptable form of social control. By March 1863, however, pay was reduced from 3s 4d to 3s, followed by a committee decision to pay the workers with tickets as opposed to cash, ostensibly to prevent the money from being spent on alcohol. The result was the worst outbreak of rioting of the Cotton Famine. Relief stores were ransacked with a vast amount of property destroyed, while several houses occupied by members of the committee had their windows broken. Order was only restored following the arrival of the 11th Hussars and the reading of the Riot Act. While a compromise was reached by providing half of the relief in cash, the episode showed that “social control” was being used to regulate how the poor should spend their money.

While cash formed the basis of controlling the working classes in Lancashire, other parts of the country saw charities attempting alternative forms of “social control”, predominantly through religion. Cardiff had seen its population increase by some 528 per cent between 1831 and 1861 thanks to the growth of its docks. Here, the apparent “problem” wasn’t a lack of work or cash, but rather a lack of morals. According to the wife of a clergyman, Cardiff was “marred by the fearful plague spot which generally disfigures such towns [where] intemperance and debauchery emerging from their dens stride along the streets unmasked in broad daylight […] presented a shocking sight”. George Smart, treasurer of the Cardiff branch of the YMCA, identified that “of an evening, the state of Bute Street and Bute Road is a disgrace to everyone – a mile long – a mile of temptations”. Sailors were said to be a chief cause of problems in Cardiff, and charities run mainly by religious denominations endeavoured to “moralise the poor and create a Christian city” by providing alternatives to
the brothels and bars frequented by sailors. Prostitutes were offered “facilities for their reception into ‘respectable’ society” and missionaries entered areas of poverty to impose “a discipline on the poor”. Drawing mainly on the “older elite of the town” with a particular Christian response to the urban problems created by sailors, “uncontaminated pleasure” was provided with the opening of temperance music halls, “mutual improvement” classes in chapels, and “educational penny readings”. Coffee taverns were opened to offer an alternative to the alehouse. For the donor, however, it offered power and publicity, with lists of donors published in local newspapers and charity annual reports. Other donors were offered religious salvation, with one advised that his gift was acknowledged by the local clergy with “sincere thanks [praying that] Almighty God to reward him with his blessing”. Any gifts, however, would also place an obligation on the head of the recipient of charity ensuring, for example, that attendance by children at charity funded Sunday Schools would "encourage each other in the religious instruction of the ignorant”. In a similar vein, the Bible Society took the elements of social control even further, by seeking to “evoke in the labouring population the duty of loyalty, and subordination to their superiors”. It seems that even with the word “charity” being synonymous with the conduct of Christ, implementation of social control was a practice freely applied by religious groups.

Through these two case studies, it can be seen that whether through money in the case of the Manchester area, or through the indoctrination of religion upon Cardiff’s working classes, “social control” is an underlying reason behind what initially may appear to be seen as kindness. Those in receipt of relief felt obliged to live their lives in a way dictated to by their benefactors, by not spending their money on alcohol and “spreading the word” of the gospel. From what we have seen in these two industrial centres, it is difficult to disagree that J. A. Roebuck’s sentiments spoke for many of the philanthropists and charity owners of the period.
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