

CURRENT BOOKS

FELLOWS' CHOICE

Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows of the Wilson Center

**THE IDEA OF POVERTY:
England in the Early
Industrial Age**
by Gertrude Himmelfarb
Knopf, 1984
196 pp. \$25

Who are the "truly needy," and how can their needs be attended to?

The questions are not merely rhetorical. Behind every effort to relieve the suffering of the poor, behind every plan to relieve society of the burden of supporting the poor, there lies an idea of poverty—a theory of what causes and what cures it. Such is the case today, and so it was during England's industrial adolescence, as Gertrude Himmelfarb,

historian at the City College of New York, convincingly demonstrates.

She does so with a series of sharp intellectual portraits of significant British philosophers, journalists, novelists, and pamphleteers (and one German revolutionary), men who helped shape the vocabulary of poverty theory from the time of Adam Smith to that of Charles Dickens—a period extending roughly from the mid-18th to the mid-19th centuries. (A second volume will take the subject up to 1920.)

Himmelfarb begins with the political economist Adam Smith (1723–1790) because he was the most articulate and influential 18th-century exponent of what she terms the "traditional" outlook. Originating in the 16th century, this view assumed the poor to be just like everybody else. Smith believed in a social continuum—a democratic premise which endowed everyone, from the lowest ranks to the highest, with the same motives and gave them the same stakes in a successful economy. Every healthy Englishman was capable of participating in the free, expanding, industrial economy that he advocated (and which, to a certain extent, already existed). Nothing more was required, according to this optimistic blueprint, than the common human attribute, "the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange."

Ironically, it was an avowed disciple of Smith, Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834), who posed the most serious challenge to these sanguine assumptions. To Malthus—whose bleak forecasts helped give economics the name "dismal science"—the poor were outside, even a threat to, society because, he believed, they were morally deficient and therefore incapable of limiting their own birthrate. By raising the specter of a population constantly at the mercy of the food supply, he claimed to have discovered an inverse relationship where Smith had found a direct one, in an industrial society, between the "wealth of nations" and the "happiness and comfort of the lower orders."

The growth of industry would indeed promote the wealth of the nation, Malthus said, but only at the expense of the welfare of the poor; it

would lead to an increase of population without a matching increase in the food supply.

Such contrary assumptions about the nature of the poor led, as Himmelfarb shows, to equally opposed conclusions about poor relief. Smith was partial to holding out the carrot. He argued that it was the opportunity to better oneself through work that cured poverty. He also feared that most employers, if left to their own devices, would underpay their laborers and so destroy the workers' hopes of advancement. Accordingly, Smith counted himself among those who favored continuing England's old Poor Laws (promulgated by Queen Elizabeth I in the late 16th century), which provided the unemployed with more than a subsistence income. Only competition from a *high* level of poor relief would, he believed, induce employers to offer reasonable wages in order to attract and keep workers, thus increasing the wealth of the nation.

Malthus, favoring the stick, attacked the Poor Laws because he thought that only if the plight of the nonworking poor were truly miserable would laborers exert themselves to avoid poverty. Moreover, relief given to the poor would only increase their number, thus making their condition even worse. Relief, in other words, was itself a cause of poverty.

Much of the poverty debate through the mid-19th century drew on the conflicting assumptions of Smith and Malthus. Sharing Smith's belief in a single society was the historian Thomas Carlyle, who argued that work defined man—distinguished him from other animals and dignified him. Since all men were capable of working, the only real distinctions in society, Carlyle held, were political. The journalist William Cobbett, believing that all Englishmen possessed the same rights, crusaded in print to give to the poor what he believed they inherently deserved as Englishmen—the right to vote. The writings of Carlyle and Cobbett added a distinctly political dimension to the definition of, and the debate over, poverty: The poor were the disenfranchised. One solution to the problem of poverty, then, was to give the poor the vote.

Himmelfarb shows that those who worked from the Malthusian premise were a politically varied lot. On the far left, there was Friedrich Engels, son of a German mill owner, a fervent Left Hegelian, and the generous supporter of Karl Marx. Himmelfarb credits Engels with having "invented" the proletariat in his *Conditions of the Working Class in England in 1844* (first German edition, 1845), a work based on his 21-month stay in Manchester. That Engels played fast and loose with the facts was typical of most contemporary writers on poverty. Nowhere in his study did he note, for instance, that laborers in Manchester, widely known as the most wretched industrial city in England, "could afford a quantity and quality of meat and drink that would have been the envy of the German or French worker." Engels was too eager to make of the working class and the bourgeoisie what Himmelfarb describes as "two radically dissimilar nations as unlike as difference of race could make them." Furthermore, she observes, "by pronouncing the proletariat at war with the middle class, he made them different as much by will as by circumstance. . . ."

Thomas Mayhew's enormously popular and influential *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861–62), claiming to be a dispassionate statis-

tical study, unwittingly strengthened the Malthusian argument that the poor were a breed apart. Mayhew, a journalist, playwright, and literary jack-of-all-trades, professed to discuss all of London's poor; in fact, he dwelt only on those who couldn't or wouldn't work. His vignettes of criminals and street people, whose colorful and often violent behavior lent an exotic touch to his data, gave dramatic force to the notion that the world of poverty was a separate, alien culture.

The contribution of 19th-century novelists to the poverty debate was perhaps an ambiguous one, as Himmelfarb shows in her discussion of Charles Dickens (1812–70). There is no question that the great novelist endowed the down-and-out in his works with a complexity of character and situation previously reserved, in fiction, only for the rich. Yet the case of Dickens shows that what authors intend is not always what readers see. Though he tried to emphasize moral rather than social distinctions, his characters were cited—and still are—as typical examples of the rich and poor. Try as a novelist might to depict the poor sympathetically, more often than not it was the picturesque criminal, not the dutiful laborer, who remained in the reader's mind. Even if the novelist sought to uphold a more generous social vision (such as that of Adam Smith), he sometimes ended up reinforcing the Malthusian picture of the poor as a separate race.

Himmelfarb's even-handed presentation of all points of view, her ability to plumb each writer's position and to uncover its core assumptions about human nature, and her magisterial synthesis of Enlightenment and Victorian thought make this book an invaluable guide to England's path from the Elizabethan Poor Laws to the Welfare State. Her greatest accomplishment, however, is as an advocate—not of one point of view or another, but of the argument that *ideas* can and do shape the course of history. Without straining to do so, she also sheds light on the many sides of our own contemporary debates over the causes and cures of poverty.

—Helen Nader

**THE GRAND STRATEGY
OF THE SOVIET UNION**

by Edward N. Luttwak
St. Martin's, 1983
242 pp. \$14.95

One school of American Kremlinologists has long held that the behavior of the Soviet Union abroad, and particularly its use of force, is largely *defensive*, a repeated response to Western challenges. That view, argues Luttwak, a Fellow at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies, is not only blurred but ostrich-like—and he offers an historical overview of Russian foreign policy to discredit it.

Since the time of Stalin, Luttwak insists, Marxist-Leninist ideology and the revolutionary vision of international communism have been cynically exploited by Soviet leaders to justify Russian imperial ambitions. Indeed, the Soviet Union has become a classic military empire, using, as did the Romans, a network of "client-states, nominally independent and