

Mark Blaug

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## *The Poor Law Report Reexamined*

IN AN earlier article, I pleaded for a reappraisal of the Old Poor Law.<sup>1</sup> Despite what all the books say, the evidence that we have does not suggest that the English Poor Law as it operated before its amendment in 1834 reduced the efficiency of agricultural workers, promoted population growth, lowered wages, depressed rents, destroyed yeomanry, and compounded the burden on rate-payers. Beyond this purely negative argument, I tried to show that the Old Poor Law was essentially a device for dealing with the problems of structural unemployment and substandard wages in the lagging rural sector of a rapidly growing but still underdeveloped economy. It constituted, so to speak, "a welfare state in miniature," combining elements of wage-escalation, family allowances, unemployment compensation, and public works, all of which were administered and financed on a local level. Far from having an inhibitory effect, it probably contributed to economic expansion. At any rate, from the economic point of view, things were much the same after 1834 as before. The Poor Laws Amendment Act of 1834 marked a revolution in British social administration, but it left the structure of relief policy substantially unchanged.

In the earlier article, I criticized the commissioners who prepared the famous *Poor Law Report of 1834* for the manner in which they marshaled the evidence against the existing system, noting that the elaborate questionnaire which they circulated among the parishes was never analyzed or reduced to summary form. But I accepted the general picture which they presented of the Old Poor Law, in particular the practice of giving outdoor relief to employed workers in the form of supplements to earned wages, the amount of the supplement being proportionate to the ruling price of bread. It was this practice, described at the time as the Allowance System and more recently as the Speenhamland System, that drew most of the

<sup>1</sup> Blaug, "The Myth of the Old Poor Law and the Making of the New," *JOURNAL OF ECONOMIC HISTORY*, XXIII, No. 2 (June 1963), 151-84. A version of this article was read at a Symposium on Victorian Affairs, held under the joint sponsorship of the American Council of Learned Societies and of Indiana University, at that University, in March 1962. The stimulating discussion that followed the reading of the paper led me to pursue my argument in the present article. I wish to thank all the participants of the Symposium for their suggestions and, particularly, R. G. Cowherd, for his helpful comments in private correspondence.

fire directed against the Old Poor Law. The commissioners claimed not only that the Allowance System was "prevalent" in the South of England, but that it was in process of "extending itself over the North of England"; nor was it confined only to the countryside.<sup>2</sup> The circular which they submitted to a sample of parishes in every county contained a question on the matter of making allowances-in-aid-of-wages, and no one doubted that the commissioners rested their claim of the extent of the practice on the answers returned. In the preamble to the *Report*, the commissioners explained why they had not summarized the results of the inquiry:

By January, 1833 . . . we had received returns to our circulated queries so numerous, that it became a question of how they should be disposed of. The number and the variety of the persons by whom they were furnished, made us to consider them the most valuable part of our evidence. But the same causes made their bulk so great as to be a serious objection to their publication in full. It appeared that this objection might be diminished, if an abstract could be made containing their substance in fewer words, and we directed such an abstract to be prepared. On making the attempt, however, it appeared that not much could be saved in length without incurring the risk of occasional suppression or misrepresentation. Another plan would have been to make a selection, and leave out altogether those returns which appeared to us of no value. A very considerable portion, perhaps not less than one half, are of this description; their omission would have materially diminished the expense of copying and printing, and the remainder would have been more easily consulted and referred to when unencumbered by useless matter. But on a question of such importance as Poor Law Amendment, we were unwilling to incur the responsibility of selection. We annex, therefore, in Appendix (B), all the returns which we have received.<sup>3</sup>

What this meant was that anyone who wanted to challenge their interpretation of the facts would have had to wade through nine folio volumes running to almost 5,000 pages. None of the numerous contemporary opponents of the New Poor Law had the stomach for such an undertaking. Since that day, these volumes have continued to gather dust, for no historian has ever reported on them. Even the Webbs hardly referred to them in their mammoth volumes on the Poor Laws.

The tabulation of the answers presents serious problems, because the questions were poorly framed and the respondents were given license to answer as they pleased: often the replies were ambiguous

<sup>2</sup> *Report of the Poor Law Commission*. 1834 (9), XXVII, pp. 11, 25, 35, 44.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

or irrelevant; sometimes the questions were not answered at all. The tabulating scheme adopted below is not irreproachable, but it appears to be suitable for assessing the relief policy that actually existed in 1834. The results of the tabulation are rather surprising. The practice of making allowance payments for children, at least after the third or fourth child, was widespread. *But the Speenhamland System as such had generally disappeared by 1832, even in the South.* From the answers given, it appears that many parishes did at one time make allowances-in-aid-of-wages connected in some way to the cost of living. The Speenhamland System had its greatest vogue during the Napoleonic Wars, but the severe strictures of the Committee Reports on the Poor Laws of 1817 and 1818 and the Select Committee on Labourers' Wages of 1824 would seem to have persuaded most of the poor law vestries to do away with it.<sup>4</sup> We shall probably never know just when Speenhamland was given up. "We directed our Assistant Commissioners," the commissioners wrote, "to enquire in every parish in which they found the relief of the able-bodied existing, at what period, and from what causes, it was supposed to have arisen." What a pity similarly explicit instructions were not given to inquire when or why the Speenhamland policy of subsidizing wages was abandoned!

There is evidence that Senior and Chadwick, who drew up the questionnaire, were aware of the virtual disappearance of the Speenhamland System and framed the questions so that the answers could be interpreted to convey the misleading impression that wages were regularly subsidized. This is how the relevant question ran: "Q. 24. Have you any, and how many, able-bodied labourers in the employment of individuals receiving allowance or regular relief from your parish on their own account, or on that of their families: and if on account of their families, at what number of children does it begin?" This was followed by Question 25 which asked: "Is relief or allowance given according to any and what scale?" It is clear that Question 24 mixed up two very different things: the first part of the question referred to outdoor relief to able-bodied workers in employment, whether married or not; the second part of the question was addressed to the question of children allowance payments. Allowances for children had been an integral feature of the Poor Laws since the eighteenth century and

<sup>4</sup> See "The Myth of the Old Poor Law," (cited in n. 1), pp. 159, 166.

possibly as early as the seventeenth century. The argument against them in 1834 was Malthusian in character, and it was not a strong argument because the allowances were generally paid for a third, fourth, or fifth child, and its amount was related in each parish to the local employment opportunities for children. To be sure, almost everyone was convinced at the time that allowances for children encouraged population growth but, if so, it was not a new phenomenon. What really agitated public opinion was the Speenhamland policy of adding to the earned wages of the able-bodied in order to stabilize their real income at what was considered to be a minimum-of-existence level. This practice did not exist before 1795, and it was this which was widely believed to be destroying work incentives in the countryside. Question 24 was so worded as to confuse family allowances with wage subsidies in the effort to persuade the public that the Poor Laws were still suffering from the same maladministration to which attention had been drawn by earlier Parliamentary committees. In the *Report* itself, the commissioners pointed out that "the word *allowance* is sometimes used as comprehending all parochial relief afforded to those who are employed by individuals at the average wages of the district. But sometimes this term is confined to the relief which a person so employed obtains on account of his children, any relief which he may obtain on his own account being termed 'Payment of Wages out of Rates.' In the following *Report* we shall use the word *allowance* in its former or more comprehensive sense."<sup>5</sup> In other words, the purple language on the Allowance System in the Report of 1834 which has been quoted by generations of historians as an indictment of the practice of subsidizing wages is, in fact, an attack on all welfare payments made to families whose breadwinner is currently employed. Perhaps allowance payments for children are "a bounty on indolence and vice," but that is not what most of us believed when we read of the disastrous effects of the Old Poor Law!

If Senior and Chadwick had wanted to avoid this misunderstanding, they could have done so with very little trouble. Despite their expressed reluctance to abstract the circulated query, the official edition of the *Poor Law Report of 1834* did contain a supplement which extracted a portion of the replies, namely the answers to nine questions for the first seven counties of England;

<sup>5</sup> *Poor Law Report*, p. 12 (my italics).

taken alphabetically: Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Cheshire, Cornwall, and Cumberland.<sup>6</sup> The counties selected were deemed to be a fairly random sample of English counties, in terms of geographic, occupational, and economic characteristics: "We believe, in short, that a fairer average of the whole country cannot be taken." The first thing to note is that the first four of these seven are what we earlier called Speenhamland counties, that is, counties which the 1824 committee found to be making use of the principle of supplementing earned wages; all four are southeastern rural counties. The last three are a mixture of non-Speenhamland counties: a southwestern rural county, a northern industrial county, and a northern rural county. The commissioners summed up the answers to Question 24: of the 92 reporting parishes in the first four (Speenhamland) counties, allowances-in-aid-of-wages to the able-bodied or their families are given in 70 parishes and refused in 22, whereas in the last three (non-Speenhamland) counties, allowances are given in 28 and refused in 52.<sup>7</sup> The fact that poor relief per head averaged 14s. 5d. in the first group of counties but only 5s. 9d. in the second group was then left to tell its own story. The commissioners neglected to point out, however, that even in the four Speenhamland counties only 11 out of the 92 reporting parishes admitted that they supplemented wages judged to be deficient; out of the 70 parishes that answered "yes" to Question 24, 59 went on to say that they made payments only to workers with children, usually beginning with the fourth child, for the purpose of relieving the applicant of part of the expense of house rent. The significant fact that the policy of subsidizing wages as such was found to exist in only about 10 per cent of the rural parishes was simply glossed over both in the supplement and in the report itself.

To clarify the problem, I have separated the replies to Question 24 between those expressly admitting to supplementing earned wages and those making payments to large families in money or in kind. Due to the confusing question, however, it is sometimes difficult to decide how to interpret the answer. What is one to say when one reads in reply to Question 24 from a parish in Bedford-

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Supplement No. 1, pp. 207-15. I was not aware of the existence of this supplement when I wrote the earlier article. I had been using one of the many reprints of the *Report of 1834*, all of which unexplainably omitted this supplement.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

shire: "Allowance often made out of the Poor Book when the number of children exceeds three. Sometimes idle able-bodied men are let at a low rate of wages to the farmers, and the deficiency paid out of the Poor Book"; or, from a parish in Berkshire: "No relief is given to the Labourer in increase of wages, but relief is given in case of sickness, where there is a large family, and frequently some linen"; or, from two parishes in Warwickshire: "No; but sometimes a pair of shoes, a round frock, or pair of sheets; seldom, unless two or three children"; "No allowance is made except they are in distress, and then according to circumstances." These are of course selected troublesome examples, and most replies state clearly: "No work done for Individuals is paid for by the Parish. Allowance to all Families, beginning at the third Child, at 1s. 6d. per week." Still, one in twenty answers is equivocal in one way or the other and in such cases a judgment had to be made, sometimes on the basis of other answers to the circular. In addition, it is possible that many parishes simply would not admit to subsidizing wages for fear of implying that wages were below minimum standards in their district. In short, the tabulated replies can not claim to be of statistical value; all that can be claimed is that they are more meaningful than nine volumes of untabulated replies or than the method of selecting quotations from the circular that was used in drawing up the *Report of 1834*.

The following is an explanation of the table on pages 236 and 237. From the "Instructions from the Central Board to the Assistant Commissioners," it appears that the country was divided into twenty-six districts, each assistant commissioner being assigned to one district to visit as many parishes as he could manage in the allotted time. The "Rural Queries" were sent out by each assistant commissioner in the middle of August 1832, and most of them were returned by January 1833, some four months later.<sup>8</sup> Replies were returned for over 10 per cent of the 15,000 parishes in England and Wales, containing about 20 per cent of the population; but it is impossible to know how many parishes were actually visited by the assistant commissioners.

For purposes of making comparisons with previous data furnished in the earlier article, I have divided the counties once again into two groups, Speenhamland and non-Speenhamland, listing them in

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

order of their per capita poor relief expenditures in 1831. The twelve counties of Wales are treated as a separate county. The total number of parishes in a county and the total number of parishes replying to the questionnaire were given in the reports submitted by the assistant commissioners. So was the total population of the county, as well as the population of the reporting parishes. Columns 2 and 3, considered together, convey some notion of the representativeness of the reporting parishes.

We do not know, of course, on what basis the reporting parishes were selected, and we certainly cannot assume that they constituted anything like a random sample of the total number of parishes. Initially, one questionnaire was sent out to rural parishes. After a trial run, the wording of the questions was slightly altered and a few new questions were added. At some point, a "Town Query" was added to the "Rural Query" with yet another set of questions. In the following table, the answers to the "Town Query" are separately enumerated. Unfortunately, it proved impossible to determine the population of every town, so that the figures for county populations include the population of towns in the county. Column 6 gives the percentage of reporting parishes that testified to the existence of disguised unemployment in their district. It is the outcome of a comparison between the replies to Question 4: "Number of labourers sufficient for the proper cultivation of land?" and Question 5: "Number of agricultural labourers?" When the numerical answer to Question 5 exceeded the numbers reported under Question 4, or when a nonnumerical answer to either question left no doubt as to the answer, the parish was counted as one in which there was disguised unemployment, defined as a situation in which the number of workers employed on the land is greater than the number actually required to produce the current product.

Columns 7 and 8 have already been explained. Under Column 9, referring to Question 25: "Is relief given according to any and what scale?" only those parishes which stated that they scaled relief according to the price of bread or according to the prices of foodstuffs in general were counted as answering affirmatively. Many parishes misunderstood the question and answered: "1s. 6d. per head for every child above four if the wages amount to 10s. per week"; or "Our scale of relief is 1s. 9d. per head per week for all children above three in the family." Answers of this type are covered under Column 8, rather than Column 9. Columns 10 and 11 have refer-

TABLE I

Spennham- land Counties	Percentage of Reporting Parishes . . . .												
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Total No. of Rural Parishes	Per- centage of Rural Report- ing	Total Popu- lation in 1831 (in 000's)	Per- centage of Popu- lation in Report- ing	Poor Relief per Head in 1831 (s. d.)	With Dis- guised Unem- ploy- ment	Giving Allow- ances in-Aid- of Wages	Children Allow- ances	Using Bread Scale	Using Rounds- man System	Using Labor Rate	Paying More to Married Men	Declin- ing Produc- tivity of Labor	
Sussex	313	27	275	69	19.4	64	6	82	22	4	14	25	65
Bucks.	230	16	148	23	18.7	69	17	71	9	11	17	46	51
Suffolk	525	10	299	20	18.4	72	10	74	34	0	14	40	34
Essex	413	12	321	31	17.2	64	8	66	44	0	12	8	48
Oxford	298	10	154	42	16.11	62	10	72	28	14	28	48	41
Beds.	141	12	96	12	16.11	44	6	19	19	6	44	50	50
Northants.	343	5	181	9	16.10	67	11	67	17	22	33	50	44
Wilts.	374	8	243	20	16.9	55	35	72	55	14	14	14	59
Berks.	222	16	147	27	15.9	70	3	73	63	13	27	50	53
Norfolk	753	6	394	10	15.4	61	17	49	34	9	12	42	54
Hunts.	107	13	54	18	15.3	62	8	54	54	0	15	54	31
Camb.	169	25	145	34	13.8	65	7	51	37	5	23	33	54
York, E. R.	365	3	206	5	11.11	70	30	60	0	20	0	0	20
Leicester	339	5	199	12	11.7	56	17	33	0	11	0	17	39
Dorset	305	5	161	7	11.5	19	13	44	38	0	13	13	63
Warwicks.	255	15	340	26	9.7	50	11	60	13	24	13	8	18
Devon	475	5	500	6	9.0	50	8	67	0	4	17	0	33
York, N. R.	537	2	193	5	8.9	42	17	42	0	25	8	8	33
Notts.	269	10	228	27	6.6	43	4	4	0	11	29	4	18
Total Group	6,432	9	4,263	21	13.8	60	11	61	27	8	17	27	46



TABLE 1 (Continued)

Non-Speenham-land Counties	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Kent	421	13	484	25	14.5	53	21	49	2	2	12	21	32
Hants	342	16	318	31	13.10	68	12	74	40	0	9	32	54
Herts	147	13	145	23	13.2	67	6	17	6	17	11	17	16
Hereford	274	7	112	13	11.4	23	0	42	0	0	11	5	47
Lincoln	727	3	321	6	11.0	45	5	20	0	5	10	10	30
Surrey	146	18	491	12	10.11	48	0	55	10	3	0	14	76
Middx.	80	1	1,373	0.6	10.1	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	67
Westmorel.	116	17	56	5	9.8	38	0	24	0	0	0	0	14
Rutland	56	7	19	5	9.1	50	0	0	0	50	25	0	0
Somerset	493	5	409	16	8.10	40	16	64	24	4	8	8	28
Gloucester.	425	7	391	18	8.8	32	18	46	32	4	21	14	71
Salop.	275	7	225	23	8.2	41	0	9	0	14	5	0	32
Worcester	241	8	214	49	7.6	47	21	32	0	16	11	0	37
Wales	1,182	4	815	16	7.2	18	16	33	0	2	11	4	16
Durham	297	13	257	49	6.10	47	3	5	0	11	11	11	8
Cornwall	212	15	304	19	6.8	57	3	30	0	27	20	20	30
Derby	331	2	240	0	6.8	57	0	29	0	29	14	14	43
Stafford	345	4	415	13	6.6	71	14	14	0	29	14	7	14
Chester	500	3	338	2	6.3	50	6	6	0	0	19	6	19
Northumb.	524	4	181	13	6.3	7	0	10	0	5	15	0	5
York. W. R.	666	9	987	36	5.7	52	3	21	3	3	3	0	16
Cumberl.	294	16	172	26	5.6	23	0	6	0	0	4	9	2
Monmouth	157	6	99	13	5.5	0	0	0	0	0	22	0	22
Lancaster	444	4	1,352	4	4.5	11	0	16	0	5	5	5	26
Total Group	5,104	13	9,720	15	8.7	45	7	31	7	6	10	10	30
Parishes in Towns	3,999	9	3,348.0	—	8.4	—	31	7	2	—	—	—	—
			(in towns)				(Q. 30)	(Q. 30)					

ence to the methods of sharing the unemployed among ratepayers. With the Roundsman System, the parish ordered every occupier of property in the district to employ relief applicants at a wage fixed by the parish, the employer being repaid all that he advanced beyond a certain sum. This was the Speenhamland System pure and simple, which disguised unemployment by encouraging farmers to use more labor than they needed. Under the Labor Rate, the ratepayers agreed among themselves to employ and pay a certain share of the available labor in the district, the share being proportionate to the rates paid in each case. Those who did not employ their full complement were forced to pay an additional rate. Since the occupiers of property were also the only ratepayers, the two systems differed little, except that in the latter case an additional arbitrary element was introduced because the rates were not assessed simply on the basis of the market value of the property. Column 12 contains the answers to Question 29: "Are married men better paid than single men?" Many parishes did not need to make payments to large families because farmers in the district already paid more to married men than to single men. A parish that answered "Yes" to both Column 12 and Column 8 would be admitting that wages in the district were below the minimum necessary to raise a family. Lastly, Column 13 gives the result of asking Question 37: "Is the industry of the labourers in your neighborhood supposed to be increasing or diminishing?"

The first thing that strikes us about the results is that all the familiar features of the Old Poor Law are found more often in the Speenhamland counties than in the rest of the country. Next, the striking difference appears, not in the policy of supplementing wages, but in the payment of allowances to large families. Only 11 per cent of the Speenhamland counties and 7 per cent of the non-Speenhamland counties paid allowances-in-aid-of-wages. The worst culprits in the Speenhamland group were not Sussex, Bedfordshire, and Buckinghamshire, as one might expect, but Wiltshire and the East Riding of Yorkshire. In the non-Speenhamland group, Kent and Worcester were almost as bad. A surprisingly large percentage of the town parishes practiced the Speenhamland policy; but it ought to be pointed out that of the 113 town parishes that answered "Yes" to Question 30 (Column 7), 47 were in London. Allowances for children were certainly in common use: two out of three Speenhamland counties and one out of three non-Speenham-

land counties made such payments.<sup>9</sup> One out of four Speenhamland counties related family allowances to the cost of living, but in the non-Speenhamland group it was only significant in Hampshire, Gloucestershire, and Somersetshire. The Roundsman System and the Labor Rate were rarely found anywhere—a finding that will surprise readers of the *Report of 1834*. Other methods of relieving the unemployed—as, for example, by setting them to work on public roads—were unfortunately not adequately enumerated in the answers to the queries. Only one in ten non-Speenhamland counties paid more to married men than to single men, but one in four Speenhamland counties did so; and the practice of paying more to men with children seemed everywhere to be associated with the policy of family allowances.

Lastly, there is the finding that about half of the parishes in both groups of counties reported the existence of disguised unemployment. This fact was very much played down in the Report, which denied that there was any excess labor in the countryside: the “appearance” of an excess was merely the result of the declining productivity of labor in consequence of lavish relief.

The counties are listed in each group in the order of relief spending per head in 1831. This immediately raises the question whether any of the columns 6 through 13 show a similar trend, in which case we may be a little wiser about the causes of variations in relief expenditures. Applying a nonparametric ranking test for trend, a test which assumes nothing about the mathematical properties of the trend line or about the character of the population distribution, it turns out that the only columns which show a significant tendency to decline along with *per capita* poor relief are columns 8 and 9. It seems that family allowances, particularly when scaled in accordance with the prices of foodstuffs, were largely responsible for variations in the relief expenditures per head between counties. We may notice in passing that no discernible relationship emerged between the percentage of parishes supplementing wages of married men (columns 7 and 8) and the percentage reporting that “the industry” of workers was diminishing (Column 13). This is in direct contradiction to the claim of the *Report of 1834*:

<sup>9</sup> It turns out, however, that only 0.2 per cent of the parishes in England and Wales made payments for the first two children, and even in those cases there were usually other children in the family under ten years of age.

One of the questions circulated by us in the rural districts was, whether the labourers in the respondent's neighbourhood were supposed to be better or worse workmen than formerly? If the answers to this question had been uniformly unfavourable, they might have been ascribed to the general tendency to depreciate what is present; but it will be found, on referring to our Appendix, that the replies vary according to the poor-law administration of the district. Where it is good, the replies are, "much the same," "never were better. . . ." But when we come within the influence of the allowance and the scale, the replies are "they are much degenerated . . . they work unwillingly and wastefully."<sup>10</sup>

This is not to say that answers to Question 37 (Column 13) should be taken too seriously. After all, the overseers and vestrymen making the replies were economic amateurs and their answers in this case depended almost wholly on their social outlook and personal experiences. Just as often as not, they held both that productivity was improving due to better health and nutrition and that it was deteriorating because of the increase of beershops.

At this point, we may probe further by regrouping the counties in the manner of the earlier article. First, there is the well-established division between the high-wage counties of the North and the low-wage counties of the South.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, there is the distinction between agricultural counties and industrial counties. According to the definition of the first occupational census of 1811, an "agricultural county" is one where the majority of families derive their income from agricultural pursuits. There were fifteen such counties in 1831, and of these Herefordshire, Hertfordshire, Lincolnshire, and Rutland were not Speenhamland counties. Defining an "industrial county" as one where the majority of families derive their income from nonagricultural pursuits, there were twenty-two counties of this type in England and Wales in 1831 and none of these were Speenhamland counties. That leaves seventeen "mixed counties," where the proportion of families dependent on agriculture for their livelihood was above the national average for 1831, but in which nonagricultural occupations nevertheless loomed important. This "mixed" group includes six Speenhamland counties: Devonshire, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, and the East and North Riding of Yorkshire.<sup>12</sup> In other words, whereas no harm is done if we think of the Speenhamland counties as "agricul-

<sup>10</sup> *Poor Law Report*, p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> See "The Myth of the Old Poor Law," p. 160.

<sup>12</sup> For a convenient list of the three groups of counties, see P. Deane and W. A. Cole, *British Economic Growth, 1688-1915* (Cambridge [Eng.]: The University Press, 1962), p. 103.

tural," it would be misleading to label the non-Speenhamland counties purely and simply "industrial."

Regrouping the counties accordingly, we reach the following results:

TABLE 2

<i>Groups of Counties</i>	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Speenhamland	60	11	61	27	10	17	27	46
Non-Speenhamland	45	7	31	7	9	10	10	30
Northern	42	7	15	0	13	10	6	19
Southern	52	10	49	21	8	16	22	42
Agricultural	56	11	57	30	11	20	31	44
Mixed	45	9	35	7	11	12	8	31
Industrial	47	7	28	6	9	9	8	33
National Average	50	9	38	14	10	14	16	37

As we might expect, it is only southern agricultural counties that score above the national average on every count. It is startling to note once again how widespread was the feeling, fancied or real, that there was much disguised unemployment. Rural parishes in industrial counties reported almost as much of it as parishes in agricultural counties. Furthermore, wage subsidies to employed workers were not much more frequent in the South than in the North, but family allowances in conjunction with a bread-scale were certainly more prevalent in southern agricultural counties. The Roundsman System had totally disappeared in the North, but some industrial counties south of the line from the Severn to the Wash still indulged in it. Similarly, the Labor Rate was somewhat more frequently encountered in southern agricultural districts, and so was the practice of paying more to married men. Finally, the commissioners might have drawn some comfort from the fact that, taking groups of counties at a time, the extent to which the productivity of labor was said to be declining does correspond to the number of parishes in each group resorting to the relief policies they so much deplored. But as we noted earlier, this relationship is not found between counties within the groups.

At the end of our examination of the questionnaire we come back to the conclusion reached in the earlier article: the relatively higher level of relief per head in the so-called Speenhamland counties was due, not to the "snowball effect" of the Old Poor Law, but to the chronic unemployment and substantard wages typical of areas specializing in the production of wheat and lacking alternative opportunities in industry. The relatively heavier burden of the

rates in these districts was the result of the policy of giving allowances to families with children. In most cases, the allowance was so modest that it came within the cardinal rule the commissioners laid down for the New Poor Law: "his [the relief applicant's] situation shall not be made really or apparently so eligible as the situation of the independent labourer of the lowest class." There is no doubt that children allowances were given only where wages were below the national average: a very high negative correlation is found between agricultural wages in each county collected by Bowley from other questions in the Rural Query,<sup>13</sup> and the percentage of parishes providing family allowances ( $r = -0.86$  at the 5 per cent level of significance).

Correlation is one thing and causality is another. *The Report of 1834* would have us believe that the causal chain ran from outdoor relief to low wages. On the weight of the evidence, however, it is more reasonable to think that low wages were the cause and outdoor relief to large families the effect. It is true, of course, that low wages are the result of low productivity and that low productivity may be produced by low wages. But this is not to say that supplements to low wages necessarily bring about a decline in productivity and therefore a fall in wages, which is what the commissioners were arguing. When wages are below the biological minimum, the usual economic relationship between productivity and wages is reversed: the effort of workers now depends on their wages instead of wages depending on their efforts. Under these circumstances, a supplement to wages raises the consumption and hence the energy and productivity of the work force and thereby justifies an increase in wages. It represents one of those exceptional cases in economic life where we seem to get something for nothing. We have seen direct evidence that wages of agricultural workers in England and Wales between 1795 and 1834 were generally below subsistence standards.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the very existence of a pool of chronically unemployed labor in the English countryside under the Old Poor Law creates the presumption that wages were inadequate to meet minimum caloric requirements: when wages are sufficient to permit each man to supply a maximum effort per unit of time, automatic market forces will tend to eliminate unemployment by driving down wage

<sup>13</sup> See "The Myth of the Old Poor Law," Appendix E.

<sup>14</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 160-62.

rates. In short, British agriculture in 1834 was a classic case of underemployment in backward economies.

Where the *Poor Law Report* went wrong was in its assessment of the causes of agricultural unemployment; its recommendations might have been appropriate at a later date, but they were hopelessly inappropriate to the conditions that prevailed in 1834. The evidence they collected in the town and rural queries should have taught the commissioners that they had misinterpreted the consequences of the Old Poor Law. But their minds were made up, and where they did not ignore the findings, they twisted them to suit their preconceived opinions. *The Report of 1834* is not only a "wildly unhistorical document," as Tawney once said, but also a wildly unstatistical one.

MARK BLAUG, *University of London*

#### APPENDIX

#### THE SIZE OF PARISHES

When I concluded in the earlier article that the higher levels of relief per head in the Speenhamland counties were due to an excess supply of labor coupled with the lack of alternative employment possibilities, I conceded at one point that another and much simpler explanation might account for the facts: "The *Report of 1834* presented some evidence to show that small parishes, measured in terms of population per acre, granted more relief per head than large parishes, the reason being that the intimate personal connections between overseers and farm hands in small parishes invited prodigality. If this were so, the high rates of relief per head in southern rural counties might be due to the fact that most of the 1,000 parishes under fifty inhabitants and most of the 6,000 parishes under three hundred inhabitants were located in southern agricultural districts. To test this hypothesis, we would have to examine the size distribution of parishes among counties, a question which cannot be entered into here."

I avoided testing this hypothesis at the time for fear of cluttering an already complicated argument. This proved to be a tactical error, because a number of my readers seized upon this concession as hinting at what they took to be the true explanation of the heavy relief burden in certain counties. The purpose of this appendix is to close this loophole in my thesis.

The relevant evidence is to be found in Supplement No. 2 of the *Report of 1834*, which gives the population per parish and township in every county in the census year 1831 for fifteen uneven class-intervals. To test the hypothesis, I have aggregated the counties under various headings and reduced the class-intervals to thirteen. I had hoped initially to supplement this information by data on the acreage per parish, but it proved impossible to obtain this material for all parishes. In what follows, therefore, the size of a parish is measured by the number of residents and not by the population density per acre.

APPENDIX TABLE 1

<i>Population per Parish</i>	<i>England and Wales</i>	<i>Speenhamland Counties</i>	<i>Non-Speenhamland Counties</i>	<i>Agricultural Counties</i>	<i>Mixed Counties</i>	<i>Industrial Counties</i>
Under 50	737	292	445	214	279	244
50-100	1,170	416	754	393	476	301
100-300	4,774	1,848	2,926	1,762	2,080	932
300-500	3,121	1,295	1,826	1,349	1,226	546
500-800	2,232	870	1,362	987	689	556
800-1,000	816	293	513	333	245	228
1-2,000	1,543	489	1,054	584	418	441
2-3,000	437	109	328	128	158	151
3-4,000	209	63	146	60	73	76
4-5,000	133	26	107	42	39	52
5-10,000	245	29	216	26	75	144
10-50,000	118	9	109	7	10	101
Over 50,000	10	1	9	0	0	10
Total parishes	15,535	5,748	9,787	5,983	5,740	3,812
Total population (in thousands)	13,952	3,558	10,394	3,691	4,043	6,318
Arithmetic mean population per parish	898	632	1,060	534	704	1,683
Median population per parish	368	348	384	394	306	428

There were 15,535 parishes in England and Wales, having a population in 1831 of almost 14 million. The mean population per parish was 898, but the median parish contained 368 residents. With the median so far below the mean, it is apparent that the distribution was sharply skewed to the right: a few counties, namely, Lancashire, Middlesex, Surrey, Warwickshire, and the West Riding of Yorkshire contained most of the large urban parishes with populations of 10,000 or more. About 36 per cent of all parishes were located in the seventeen Speenhamland counties, having an average of 632 inhabitants per parish. The remaining parishes in the thirty-seven non-Speenhamland counties had an average population of 1,060, due to the presence of 116 giant urban parishes.

If we are to explain the higher levels of relief per head in certain counties by the small size of the average parish in these counties, the divergence in size from the national average ought to be striking. But the median parish in the Speenhamland counties is only a little below the median for the country as a whole, and if "typical" means modal or more frequently found than any other size, the typical parish in all counties contained one hundred to three hundred people. Even if we select the nine notorious Speenhamland counties (see map



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accompanying the original article), it turns out that 50 per cent of the parishes in these counties had no more than 368 residents, a median exactly equal to the national median. And Sussex—that favorite example of the critics of the Old Poor Law, being the county with the highest *per capita* relief burden in England—had a mean population per parish of 847 and a median parish size of 320, neither figure being significantly different from that of England as a whole. It seems, therefore, that we ought to reject the hypothesis that the prevalence of small parishes in what we have called the Speenhamland counties made for a high relief bill. Since the original hypothesis is itself somewhat vague—how small must a parish be for a magistrate to know a relief recipient by name and circumstance?—we shall have to be satisfied with this impressionistic conclusion.