

# In the Shadow of Speenhamland: Social Policy and the Old Poor Law

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*In 1996, the U.S. Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act that ended the entitlement of poor families to government assistance. The debate leading up to that transformation in welfare policy occurred in the shadow of Speenhamland—an episode in English Poor Law history. This article revisits the Speenhamland episode to unravel its tangled history. Drawing on four decades of recent scholarship, the authors show that Speenhamland policies could not have had the consequences that have been attributed to them. The article ends with an alternative narrative that seeks to explain how the Speenhamland story became so deeply entrenched.*

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“Speenhamland” is not a well-known term. Those who know the reference are most likely to have read about it in Karl Polanyi’s classic work, *The Great Transformation*.<sup>1</sup> But even most of those who are familiar with the reference would be

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astonished to learn that Speenhamland has had a very real impact on social policy debates in England and the United States for two full centuries. In the twentieth century, this impact has generally occurred under the radar of explicit political debate and publicity.

One such incident occurred in the United States during the Nixon Administration when Daniel Patrick Moynihan developed his Family Assistance Plan. As Moynihan recalled,

In mid-April Martin Anderson, of [Arthur] Burns's staff, prepared "A Short History of a 'Family Security System'" in the form of excerpts on the history of the Speenhamland system, the late eighteenth-century British scheme of poor relief taken from Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*.<sup>2</sup>

The gist of Anderson's memo was that in that earlier historical case, the intended floor under the income of poor families actually operated as a ceiling on earned income with the consequence that the poor were further immiserated. Anderson worried that Moynihan's income floor might inadvertently produce the same unintended consequence. Anderson's memo was sufficiently powerful that Nixon asked Moynihan to investigate the accuracy of Polanyi's historical analysis. Moynihan's staff were sent scurrying off to investigate the views of contemporary historians on this question. The Family Assistance Plan was ultimately defeated in the U.S. Senate but only after Richard Nixon had a conversation about the work of Karl Polanyi.<sup>3</sup>

Canada had a similar episode more recently. In December 2000, newly reelected Prime Minister Jean Chretien floated as a trial balloon the idea of a comprehensive antipoverty program based on a guaranteed annual income for all Canadians. A flurry of press reports followed including an article in the *National Post* that explicitly referred to the Speenhamland enactment of a guaranteed income scheme in 1795. The article insisted that in this earlier episode, employers had paid below-subsistence wages, and some workers chose the collection of benefits over work:

The first enactment of a guaranteed annual income may have been in 1795 in England, where the Speenhamland system extended subsidies for the infirm to include able-bodied workers. . . . The system revealed the challenge inherent in designing such a policy; the supplement served as a subsidy that allowed employers to hire workers at below-subsistence wages, and allowed landlords to raise rents. Meanwhile, some workers found themselves better off collecting benefits than working.<sup>4</sup>

In both of these cases, the Speenhamland story in which an income floor was inadvertently transformed into an income ceiling served as a chilling cautionary tale against governmental initiatives to establish a guaranteed annual income.

The same argument has been repeated by progressive thinkers in current debates over the desirability of establishing a universal basic income for all citi-

zens.<sup>5</sup> Analysts who favor using state action to improve the situation of the poor question whether a well-intentioned minimum income would follow the Speenhamland precedent and become a maximum income.<sup>6</sup> They fear that employers would use the increased income received by the poor as an excuse to lower the wages that they pay these employees. The appearance of this argument would be reason enough to revisit the actual history of Speenhamland. But there is a second and more powerful justification for focusing on this historical episode.

Conservative critics of welfare in the United States in the period from 1978 to 1996 formulated their criticisms of the main Federal welfare program—Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—in precisely the same terms that English critics of Speenhamland had used in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The parallels in these arguments have been recognized by Albert Hirschman in his analysis of perversity as one of the three “rhetorics of reaction.”<sup>7</sup> The core of the perversity thesis is that well-intentioned policies that provide assistance to the poor by means of state intervention will inevitably harm recipients by substituting perverse incentives in place of the market mechanisms that teach the poor to work hard and exercise sexual restraint.

A number of these conservative critics of AFDC were completely self-conscious about the parallels between Speenhamland and AFDC. The same Martin Anderson who wrote the memo in the Nixon White House published *Welfare*, which was one of the first conservative scholarly attacks on AFDC.<sup>8</sup> Anderson quoted Polanyi’s account of Speenhamland at length to argue against both income guarantees and programs like AFDC.<sup>9</sup> In 1984, the neoconservative historian Gertrude Himmelfarb published her influential study, *The Idea of Poverty*, in which she carefully recounted the criticisms of the Speenhamland system advanced by Malthus, Burke, de Tocqueville, and others.<sup>10</sup> Later on, she published a series of articles and books that explicitly drew the parallels between the dire consequences of the English welfare system in the Speenhamland period and the negative consequences of AFDC.<sup>11</sup> Marvin Olasky, a policy intellectual who George W. Bush credited as the theorist of “compassionate conservatism,” published an influential book called *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, whose title encapsulated his restatement of early-nineteenth-century critiques of Poor Law assistance.<sup>12</sup>

These self-conscious efforts to mobilize perversity rhetoric against AFDC had an appreciable effect on both elite and public opinion and contributed to the passage in 1996 of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act that ended the long-standing entitlement of poor families to assistance—so much so that it is fair to say that our recent welfare legislation was passed in the shadow of Speenhamland.<sup>13</sup> In fact, in 2002 when the U.S. Congress debated the reauthorization of the 1996 legislation, the terms of discussion continue to reflect the influence of perversity rhetoric. The debate centered on how many additional

hours of work should be mandated for the recipients of relief and how should the Federal Government promote marriage and sexual restraint among the poor.<sup>14</sup>

It is common for social scientists to complain that public policy is made with insufficient attention to history and social theory. In this article, however, our argument is that for both discussions of guaranteed incomes and welfare policy, a particular and tendentious reading of social history has been given far too much weight by policy makers and policy intellectuals. This is particularly the case because over the past forty years, economic and social historians have produced a large and impressive literature that has reanalyzed the English Poor Law in general and the Speenhamland period in particular.<sup>15</sup> Yet most of this literature is unknown to social scientists, and its findings about the Poor Law have had little impact on social policy debates.<sup>16</sup>

In this article, we propose to rethink and retell the story of Speenhamland. This means, fundamentally, showing how the findings of recent studies in social and economic history undermine the Speenhamland stories that have been deployed in social policy debates. But this involves more than simply reporting other scholars' results; we are offering our own analyses of some of the important remaining puzzles in this literature. We are also making a contribution to the history of social theory. While we are critical of Karl Polanyi's history of the Speenhamland episode, we are in fundamental agreement with one of his core theoretical arguments. Polanyi insisted that classical political economy was deeply shaped by the effort to explain the persistence of poverty in the Speenhamland epoch.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, Malthus and Ricardo relied on arguments about biological drives to explain human behavior, and the resulting "naturalism" became an important part of mainstream economics. We hope to build on that insight by unraveling the naturalizing logic that critics of public assistance continue to invoke. Moreover, we will offer our own alternative narrative that both makes sense of recent historical findings and helps to explain the centrality of the Speenhamland story to classical political economy.

#### THE SPEENHAMLAND STORIES

Speenhamland refers to a town in Berkshire County, England, where the county squires decreed in May 1795 that the poor should be entitled to a specific quantity of assistance depending upon the price of bread and the size of the family. This form of provision is often called aid-in-wages because when the gap between wages and the price of bread widened, the parish used poor relief funds to supplement the wages of workers and their families.<sup>18</sup> As the program spread (although it is a subject of debate as to how widely it was practiced) among England's parishes, it generated controversy. It was perceived by critics that all precedent had been violated by providing relief not just to the infirm, the aged, or the dependent but also to the "able-bodied." These criticisms were further fueled by the dramatic

increase in local poor rates (taxes) and by the findings of a series of Parliamentary reports that played a considerable role in shaping public opinion.<sup>19</sup> The most important of these was the Royal Commission Report of 1834 that issued a devastating indictment of Speenhamland and created irresistible pressure for the New Poor Law passed later in the same year. Based on what we now know to be a nonsystematic and ideologically driven method of collecting answers to a survey questionnaire, the published report confirmed what the commission had set out to document in the first place.<sup>20</sup> The main evidence mobilized in the report was hundreds of stories from local parish officials—mostly clergy—confirming the immorality and degradation of the rural poor. The report concluded that Speenhamland and the Old Poor Law more generally were wrong-headed intrusions of state power into self-regulating labor markets. Poor relief created new and perverse incentives that led to increasing pauperization. Exponential increases in childbirth and illegitimacy, declining wages and productivity, assaults on public morality and personal responsibility, and the development of a culture of indolence were only some of the effects attributed to Speenhamland.

The Royal Commission Report was widely distributed, and it influenced a broad range of scholars up through the middle of the next century. In fact, until quite recently, the report was treated as one of the important moments in the rise of the social sciences—one of the first times that a government body relied on systematic collection and analysis of data to analyze an important social problem. But a number of recent scholars have persuasively shown that the Commissioners did very little data analysis and simply used an elaborate structure of appendixes to give more weight to their “findings.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, there was little in the commission’s arguments that was original; their narrative drew heavily on arguments that had been elaborated by Joseph Townsend and T. R. Malthus in the last part of the eighteenth century.

Joseph Townsend’s *Dissertation on the Poor Law* appeared in 1786, and it used the fable of dogs and goats on an island in the Pacific to make its case against poor relief.<sup>22</sup> Townsend argued that just as the populations of goats and dogs reached an equilibrium as they each adjusted to the changing food supply, so would the population of the human poor naturally reach equilibrium were it not for the artificial intervention of poor relief.

Hunger will tame the fiercest animals, it will teach decency and civility, obedience and subjection, to the most perverse. In general it is only hunger which can spur and goad them [the poor] on to labour; yet our laws have said they shall never hunger.<sup>23</sup>

Polanyi’s characterization of Townsend’s argument is completely apt:

Hobbes had argued the need for a despot because men were *like* beasts; Townsend insisted that they were *actually* beasts and that, precisely for that reason, only a minimum of government was required.<sup>24</sup>

When the first edition of Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* was published in 1798, there was no mention of Townsend's pamphlet even though Malthus's argument followed along identical lines.<sup>25</sup> Malthus's argument began from two postulates:

First, That food is necessary to the existence of man.

Secondly, That the passion between the sexes is necessary and will remain nearly in its present state.<sup>26</sup>

The identification of these two biological drives—hunger and sex—was then the basis for Malthus's central claim that growth of human population will inevitably outstrip the available food supply. Following Townsend, Malthus argued that poor relief interferes with the self-regulating mechanisms that serve as the incentives necessary to drive the poor toward self-disciplined behavior and reproductive prudence. These mechanisms exist in the economy only in its untouched and natural state—the condition of scarcity. So, for example, when poor relief promises child allowances for those parents too poor to make ends meet, young people need no longer delay marriage until they have adequate resources to support a family.<sup>27</sup> Since Malthus strenuously opposed birth control, his goal was for the poor to postpone marriage. Precisely because every additional child promises to produce additional income for the family, the existence of poor relief encourages calculated childbearing as a more expedient means of survival than disciplined productive labor. The consequence is a rise of the birth rate that places an unwanted burden on the rest of society that has to pay the bills.

Malthus also stressed a second line of criticism—that poor relief undermined frugality, personal responsibility, and, above all, work discipline. Once again, the working premise is that the labor market depends on a delicate self-regulating system in which a perfect equilibrium of supply and demand occurs only when it functions in its natural state of scarcity. Remove the scarcity and gone is the spur to labor that only the fear of hunger can provide; no longer will workers be interested in pleasing their employers or in saving for the future. Measures designed to diminish poverty so end up making it worse: “Hope and fear are the springs of industry. . . . It is the part of a good politician to strengthen these: but our laws weaken the one and destroy the other.”<sup>28</sup>

For Malthus and those who followed his logic—including the Royal Commissioners—the specific rules for allocating poor relief were not very important; as long as some of the able-bodied poor were eligible for assistance, the negative dynamics were set in motion because people were being protected from the consequences of their own decisions. Hence, supporters of this story tended to assimilate all forms of outdoor relief to the able bodied under the single heading of the allowance system, and as long as per capita per law outlays were high, they were able to make their case that poor relief was making poverty worse.

### *The Other Story*

Leftist critics of unfettered market allocation have had their own version of the Speenhamland story, although their narrative has had a more limited impact on social policy. Marx and Engels drew from the Royal Commission Report, just as they mined other Parliamentary documents to piece together the story of early industrialization in England. However, their specific references to Speenhamland are brief. Engels wrote in *The Condition of the English Working Class*:

As long as the old Poor Law survived it was possible to supplement the low wages of the farm labourers from the rates. This, however, inevitably led to further wage reductions since the farmers naturally wanted as much as possible of the cost of maintaining their workers to be borne by the Poor Law. The burden of the poor rates would, in any case, have increased with the rise in population. The policy of supplementing agricultural wages, of course, greatly aggravated the position.<sup>29</sup>

In *Capital*, Marx wrote,

At the end of the eighteenth century and during the first decade of the nineteenth, the English farmers and landlords enforced the absolute minimum of wages by paying the agricultural labourers less than the minimum as actual wages and making up the balance in the form of parish relief.<sup>30</sup>

Marx and Engels agreed with the conclusions of the Royal Commission Report, but they rejected its explanatory logic. They agreed that the Poor Law had contributed to the immiseration of the rural poor, but the crucial mechanism was that farmers had pushed wage levels down by shifting costs on to the parish. Since a strapped employer might realistically only be able to pay eight shillings per week to an employee, the parish would add four additional shillings to ensure that the workers' families would have enough bread. But now the employer, having caught on to the dynamic, had a clear incentive to lower his own expenses by paying just seven shillings the next week so that the parish would increase its supplement to five shillings.

It is not difficult to explain why Marx and Engels took this position on the core dynamic of Speenhamland; widespread degradation of the rural poor fit the logic of their broad theory of capitalist development. Both enclosures and the Poor Law were part of the process by which wealth was extracted from the rural poor in order to help finance industrial investment. Moreover, Marx and Engels saw the system of poor relief as nothing more than a feudal remnant.

However, Marx and Engels were able to take this position because they were writing a decade or longer after the militant working-class protests that had been engendered by the 1834 New Poor Law. Had they recognized the centrality of the mobilization against the New Poor Law to the development of the working-class movement in England, they might have seen things differently.<sup>31</sup> They should

have considered why industrial workers in the industrial North of England cared so deeply about a mere “feudal remnant.” Their failure to address this issue had unfortunate consequences. Given their political and intellectual authority, the view that the Poor Law between 1795 and 1834 played a critical role in immiserating the rural working class gained a credibility that lasted for more than a century. Subsequent historians writing from a perspective critical of capitalism followed their lead. W. Hasbach, a scholar of the German Historical School, published his important study in German in 1894 and in English translation in 1908. He was followed by J. L. and Barbara Hammond, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Karl Polanyi, and E. J. Hobsbawm and George Rude, all of whom concurred in seeing the Poor Law as a factor in rural impoverishment.<sup>32</sup>

But it is not as though the Royal Commission’s narrative completely escaped criticism. It was denounced by the rural and urban poor who mobilized extensively against the 1834 New Poor Law, and “Tory radical” opinion allied with the poor in resisting both the dismal implications of Malthus’s doctrine and the harshness of the 1834 bill.<sup>33</sup> Even J. R. McCulloch, an important classical economist, called into question the objectivity of the investigation.<sup>34</sup> Criticism continued in the twentieth century in R. H. Tawney’s reference to “that brilliant, influential, and wildly unhistorical report.”<sup>35</sup> Ironically, the most elaborate criticism was offered by the Webbs in Part II of their Poor Law History. The Webbs note that the Royal Commission

was not an inquiry into the prevalence and cause of destitution: for the “poverty of the poor” was at that time deemed to be both explained and justified by the current assumptions underlying the Malthusian “Law of Population” and the economists’ “Theory of the Wage Fund.”<sup>36</sup>

In other words, the Commissioners neglected all structural sources of poverty because they had already embraced theories that explained poverty by Malthusian and Ricardian mechanisms. But the power of the Webbs’ criticism is ultimately vitiated because they accepted the accuracy of the report’s central finding—that the allowance system was destructive.

The active members of the Commission . . . started with an overwhelming intellectual pre-possession, and they made only the very smallest effort to free their investigations and reports from bias—a defect in their work which is not to be excused merely because we are to-day inclined to believe, as they were themselves complacently assured, that their pre-possessions against the Rate in Aid of Wages was substantially right.<sup>37</sup>

All told, the Webbs helped to perpetuate the image of the investigation as a major work of social science when they wrote of the commission’s investigation:

Their voluminous reports, together with the equally voluminous other statements, were printed in full, comprising altogether no fewer than twenty-six folio volumes, containing in

the aggregate over thirteen thousand printed pages, all published during 1834-1835, being by far the most extensive sociological survey that had at that date ever been undertaken.<sup>38</sup>

In sum, the Webbs' ambivalent verdict helped the authority of the Royal Commission Report to survive until the revisionist assault began with Mark Blaug's articles in the 1960s.<sup>39</sup>

### *Polanyi's Contribution*

When Karl Polanyi began to explore the Speenhamland episode in the 1930s virtually all of the historical sources available to him affirmed that the Speenhamland episode had degraded the rural poor. Nevertheless, Polanyi was determined to challenge the use that market liberals—especially the Austrians von Mises and Hayek—had made of Speenhamland.<sup>40</sup> They had argued that Speenhamland precisely prefigured the disastrous consequences of state interventionism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They claimed that all efforts to use government to improve the life chances of the poor would end up undermining the economy's vitality and would ultimately hurt the people that the policies had been intended to help. As a supporter of the achievements of municipal socialism in Vienna, Polanyi was determined to demonstrate the flaws in the historical parallel that these free market theorists had developed.<sup>41</sup>

Polanyi's strategy was to bring a greater degree of institutional specificity to the historical comparison. Instead of just discussing markets and state action in the abstract, he sought to unpack the Speenhamland episode by looking more closely at the actual workings of institutions. His central argument was that the Speenhamland incident could not be generalized to later cases of state action because it occurred before the working class was capable of mobilizing to defend its own interests. This was exemplified by the existence of the Anti-Combination Laws that prohibited all trade union activity. Polanyi is explicit that had it not been for these laws, Speenhamland aid-in-wages might well have "had the effect of raising wages instead of depressing them as it actually did."<sup>42</sup> But even more fundamental than the legal obstacles to trade union activity was the fact that the complicated payment system that Speenhamland initiated prevented rural workers from understanding their actual social position.

[Speenhamland] prevented laborers from developing into an economic class and thus deprived them of the only means of staving off the fate to which they were doomed in the economic mill.<sup>43</sup>

In sum, the difference between Speenhamland and Vienna is that in the former workers had not organized themselves as a class, so there was no mechanism to block state action from producing perverse consequences.

Table 1  
*Divergent Speenhamland Narratives*

Proponent	Cause	Key Mechanism	Outcome
Joseph Townsend, T. R. Malthus, Royal Commissioners, Ludwig von Mises, and Marvin Olasky	Wide use of bread scale undermines scarcity necessary for market self-regulation, discipline, and efficiency.	Poor relief works as perverse incentive to early marriage, increased birth rate, and voluntary unemployment.	Reduced productivity, lower wages, excessive population growth, and increased poverty.
Marx and Engels, Hammonds, Webbs, and E. P. Thompson	Wide use of bread scale facilitates unilateral wage reductions by employers.	Farmers shift costs on to the parish to save on their wage bills.	Reduced productivity and lower wages.
Karl Polanyi	Wide use of bread scale and Anti-Combination Acts facilitate unilateral wage reductions by employers.	Farmers shift costs on to the parish at a time when rural workers cannot act collectively.	Reduced productivity and lower wages.
Our synthesis of recent historical scholarship: Mark Blaug, J. P. Huzel, and K. D. M. Snell	Bread scale not widely used; rural impoverishment caused by massive shift of industries to North and deindustrialization in the South; unemployment, enclosures, and decline of crafts.	Economic contraction after 1815, intensified by England's return to gold at the prewar parity, increases agricultural unemployment and rural poverty.	Poor relief significantly buffers rural poor against unemployment and loss of other income sources and provides food and clothing.

While Polanyi's analytic strategy was clearly an advance over earlier versions of the Speenhamland story, he, also, was seriously misled by the historical sources. Ironically, Polanyi was warned of the problems in his argument by G. D. H. Cole, the great English labor historian and social theorist. Polanyi had sent Cole the first half of the manuscript of *The Great Transformation* in 1943, and Cole wrote back with extensive criticisms. Cole wrote,

I think that all through this chapter [7] you treat Speenhamland as much more universal than it was, and also make much too light of county differences in wage policy.<sup>44</sup>

However, the criticisms arrived too late since Polanyi had already sent the manuscript to its U.S. publisher.<sup>45</sup>

### *Divergent Narratives*

As Table 1 shows, these various efforts to make sense of Speenhamland shared similar conclusions about its ultimate impact on the rural poor. Leftist critics of

capitalism saw a very different dynamic at work than that identified by free market theorists, and Polanyi, in particular, added another layer of institutional causality. The body of historical scholarship that has developed over the past forty years, however, makes it difficult to hold on to any of these narratives.

#### COMPLEXITIES AND CAUSAL GAPS

Speenhamland has to be understood in the context of England's long and unique Poor Law history.<sup>46</sup> Although initial practices date to the late thirteenth century, the famous 1597 and 1601 Elizabethan Tudor statutes were the most important of the English Poor Law legislation. The law established an obligation at the local level to assist those who were impoverished as a consequence of illness, infirmity, family breakdown, or temporary unemployment. There was much variation in actual Poor Law practices as parishes experimented with a variety of different policies designed to protect the poor while maintaining work incentives.<sup>47</sup> There was also considerable variation over time within parishes; efforts to find the right policy mix at the local level sometimes produced alternating periods of generosity and stinginess.<sup>48</sup>

Some degree of controversy over the Poor Laws existed from their inception, but it was in the last years of the eighteenth century that debate intensified with calls for the complete abolition of all "outdoor"—outside the workhouse—relief. Much of the blame for this shift in attitudes is generally placed on the rapidly rising cost of maintaining parish relief in this period. Per capita poor relief outlays are estimated to have more than doubled between 1749 and 1801.<sup>49</sup>

Considerable uncertainty about these rising expenditures remains to this day because of the sheer empirical difficulty of understanding a highly decentralized system of social welfare in which critical decisions were made by local parish officials. We have data on the total poor law outlays of fifteen thousand parishes in England for selected years from 1802 to 1834, but we do not know precisely how the expenditures were divided among assistance to the vulnerable populations—the elderly, the sick, orphans, and unwed mothers; support for local poorhouses; and various forms of outdoor relief, including assistance to the able-bodied poor. In some parishes, detailed registries of all outlays have survived, but it is often difficult for historians to reconstruct the particular rules under which a specific individual was given six shillings each week. Even after two centuries, historians have closely analyzed the surviving records of a relatively small number of parishes.<sup>50</sup> There were some periodic parliamentary surveys that sought to find out about local relief policies, but generally responses were received from only a small fraction of all parishes, and it is difficult to know if the responses are representative.<sup>51</sup>

It is clear, however, that the sharp rise in poor law expenditures was largely a regional phenomenon—focusing on Southeastern England, both the wheat-growing areas and the pastoral areas where both rural and cottage industries were in decline.<sup>52</sup> In the older cities, it is believed that poor relief for the able bodied was

Table 2  
*Forms of Relief by Modern Names*

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1. *Minimum guaranteed income.* This is the Speenhamland bread scale that provides specific amounts of aid in support of wages depending on the price of bread and the size of the family.
  2. *Seasonal unemployment insurance.* During the winter months when agricultural work was scarce, some parishes provided unemployed farm workers and their families with a weekly stipend that varied depending upon family size.
  3. *Public works.* Some parishes put the unemployed to work building roads or performing other types of work. Sometimes the supervision was done by public authorities and sometimes by private contractors.
  4. *Employer subsidies.* Some parishes used poor relief funds to reimburse farmers and other employers who hired the unemployed. This was often called the roundsman system because the unemployed workers would make the rounds of local employers.
  5. *Welfare.* Some parishes allocated a certain proportion of the unemployed to each local employer with the idea that they would provide employment instead of paying taxes for poor relief. This is often referred to as the labour rate system.
  6. *Child allowances.* Many agricultural parishes provided a supplement to the income of male agricultural workers who had more than two or three children who were not yet of working age.
  7. *Workhouse.* Well before 1834, a minority of parishes required that the unemployed seeking relief enter a residential facility that imposed work requirements. Some of these facilities were publicly administered, and some were run by private contractors.
  8. *Out-of-parish relief.* Individuals were entitled to assistance in the parish in which they had been born or gained settlement. Sometimes, however, individuals would experience hardship while away from the home parish and request assistance. The implied threat was that if they did not receive help, they would return home and the parish would be obliged to assist them.
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rare, except for periods of acute unemployment or abrupt increases in the price of bread.<sup>53</sup> In the North, the combination of sheep and cattle pasturage, a tradition of small-owner cottage industry, and rapidly growing urban industry meant that per capita poor relief outlays were far lower than in the South.<sup>54</sup> These regional differences were magnified by the greater seasonality in the demand for labor that was characteristic of the wheat-producing areas, especially as alternative income sources began to dry up.<sup>55</sup>

But if we focus on the Southeastern parts of England, there is a second dimension of empirical complexity. During the Speenhamland period—1795 to 1834—parishes experimented with a broad array of different ways of distributing relief that would have quite varying consequences. In fact, the range of measures closely resembles the repertoire of relief policies that are still debated two hundred years later. And because of the decentralization of administration, we lack definitive information on how widely each of these particular practices was employed. These policies are listed by their modern names when available (see Table 2).

One of the recurrent problems in the literature is that analysts group a number of these distinct policies under one heading and proceed as though all the methods can be expected to have the same consequences. For example, “the allowance system” and “aid-in-wages” are often used to cover the first six different policies. As

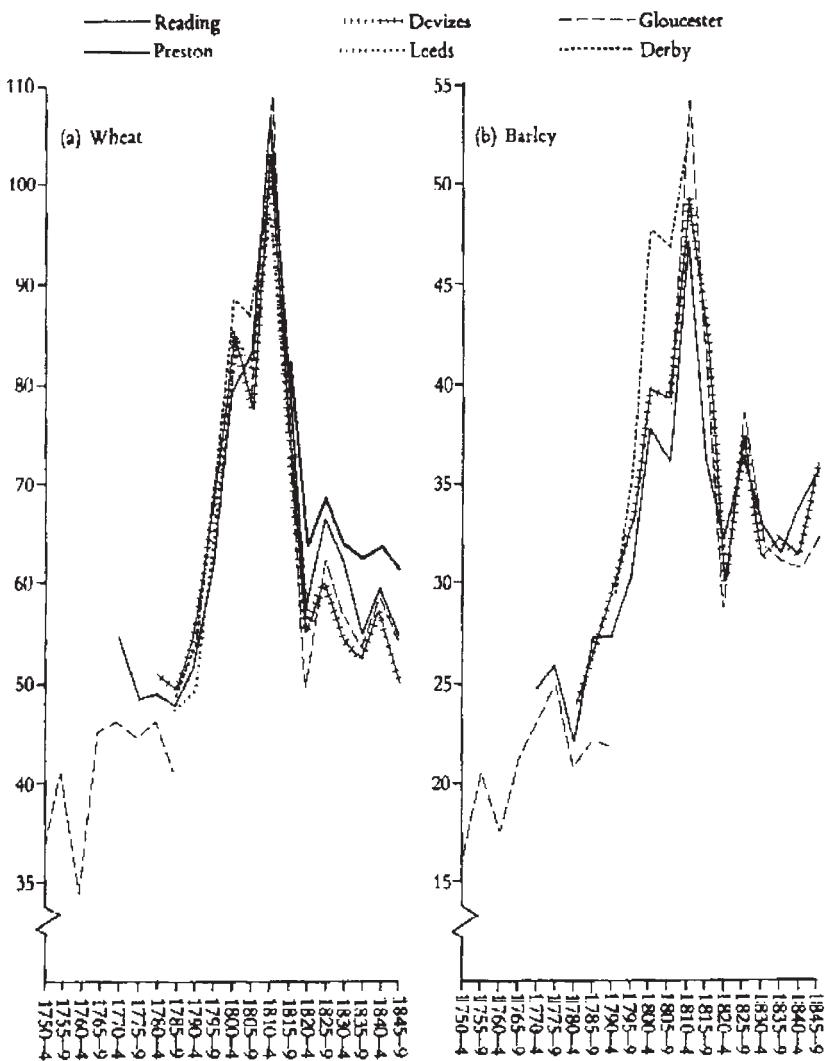


Figure 1. Trends in grain prices.

Source: Richard Perren, "Markets and Marketing," in *Agrarian History*, vol. 6., edited by G. E. Mingay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 190-274. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press, p. 231.

we will see, these disaggregation problems contribute to the difficulties in developing a clear understanding of Speenhamland.

A third empirical complexity results from the rapid change in prices that occurs across the Speenhamland period. The first half of the period coincides with the Napoleonic Wars that produced an extremely sharp increase in price levels, particularly for wheat—the dietary staple of both the rural and urban working classes. From 1813 on, as the war winds down, there is a sharp fall in price levels

## STATISTICAL APPENDIX

Table I.t. Annual average prices of grain per Imperial quarter in England and Wales 1771–1850

Year	Annual Average Prices per Imperial Quarter							
	Wheat	Barley	Oats	Rye	Beans	Pea		
	s.	d.	s.	d.	s.	d.	s.	d.
1771	—	—	48	7	25	5	17	2
1772	—	—	52	3	26	1	16	8
1773	—	—	52	7	29	2	17	8
1774	—	—	54	3	29	4	18	4
1775	—	—	49	10	26	9	17	—
1776	—	—	39	4	26	9	15	5
1777	—	—	46	11	21	1	16	1
1778	—	—	43	3	23	4	15	7
1779	—	—	34	8	20	1	14	5
1780	—	—	16	9	17	6	13	2
1781	—	—	46	—	17	—	22	10
1782	—	—	49	3	23	2	14	1
1783	—	—	54	3	23	2	7	29
1784	—	—	50	4	28	8	15	9
1785	—	—	43	1	24	9	17	8
1786	—	—	40	—	25	1	18	6
1787	—	—	42	5	23	4	17	2
1788	—	—	46	4	22	8	15	8
1789	—	—	52	9	23	6	16	6
1790	—	—	54	9	26	3	10	9
1791	—	—	48	7	26	10	18	1
1792	—	—	43	—	—	—	16	9
1793	—	—	49	3	31	1	20	6
1794	—	—	52	3	31	9	21	3
1795	—	—	75	2	37	5	24	5
1796	—	—	78	7	35	4	21	10
1797	—	—	53	9	37	2	16	3
1798	—	—	51	10	39	—	19	5
1799	—	—	66	—	36	2	27	6
1800	—	—	113	10	59	10	39	4
1801	—	—	119	6	58	6	37	—
1802	—	—	69	10	33	4	20	4
1803	—	—	58	10	25	4	21	6
1804	—	—	62	3	31	—	24	3
1805	—	—	89	9	44	6	28	4
1806	—	—	79	1	38	8	27	7
1807	—	—	75	4	39	4	28	4
1808	—	—	81	4	—	—	33	4
1809	—	—	97	4	47	—	33	5
1810	—	—	166	5	48	7	28	7
1811	—	—	95	3	42	3	37	7

## STATISTICAL APPENDIX

Table I.t. (cont.)

Year	Annual Average Prices per Imperial Quarter							
	Wheat	Barley	Oats	Rye	Beans	Pea		
	s.	d.	s.	d.	s.	d.	s.	d.
1812	—	—	126	6	66	9	44	6
1813	—	—	109	9	58	6	38	6
1814	—	—	74	4	37	4	25	8
1815	—	—	65	7	30	3	23	7
1816	—	—	75	6	33	11	27	2
1817	—	—	90	11	49	4	32	5
1818	—	—	86	3	53	10	32	5
1819	—	—	74	6	45	9	28	2
1820	—	—	57	10	33	10	24	2
1821	—	—	56	1	26	—	19	6
1822	—	—	44	7	21	10	18	1
1823	—	—	53	4	31	6	22	11
1824	—	—	63	11	36	4	24	10
1825	—	—	68	6	40	—	25	8
1826	—	—	58	8	34	4	23	2
1827	—	—	58	9	37	7	23	2
1828	—	—	60	3	32	10	22	6
1829	—	—	66	3	32	6	22	9
1830	—	—	64	3	32	7	24	5
1831	—	—	66	4	38	—	25	4
1832	—	—	58	8	33	1	20	5
1833	—	—	52	11	27	6	18	5
1834	—	—	46	2	29	—	20	11
1835	—	—	39	4	29	11	22	—
1836	—	—	48	6	32	10	23	1
1837	—	—	55	10	30	4	23	1
1838	—	—	64	7	31	5	22	5
1839	—	—	70	8	39	6	25	12
1840	—	—	66	4	36	5	25	8
1841	—	—	64	6	32	10	22	5
1842	—	—	57	3	27	6	19	3
1843	—	—	45	3	29	6	14	7
1844	—	—	51	1	33	8	20	7
1845	—	—	50	10	31	3	22	6
1846	—	—	54	8	32	8	23	8
1847	—	—	69	9	44	2	28	8
1848	—	—	56	6	31	6	20	6
1849	—	—	44	3	27	9	17	6
1850	—	—	40	3	23	5	15	5

Sources: 1771–1842: BPP 1843, viii; 1843–50: BPP 1879–91, lxv, p. 429 (wheat, barley, oats and rye); House of Lords Sessional Papers, xx, p. 391 (1843–50 beans and pea).

Figure 2. Grain prices.

Source: G. E. Mingay, ed., *Agrarian History*, vol. 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 974–75. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.

that continues beyond 1834 (see Figures 1 and 2). These dramatic shifts in price levels generated enormous debates among contemporaries, and to this day, economic historians are still debating the appropriate measures of price changes in this period.<sup>56</sup>

A final empirical complexity may well be the most serious and the most telling. As only parish officers could be counted on to give the kinds of answers that commissioners or parliamentary investigators were seeking, it is extremely rare that an actual recipient of poor relief would ever be questioned. Hence, the testimony of recipients is not available to counter or compare against the extensive reports from local elites, most of whom readily complied with the commissioners in making broad generalizations about the behavior, motivation, and mental states of the recipient population. Only now are we beginning to break these long silences as historians mine letters, wills, and petitions from the rural poor to create a more holistic view of the system of poor relief.<sup>57</sup>

## Causal Gaps

Both the narrative constructed by Malthus and the Royal Commissioners and the alternative narrative constructed by critics of the market have gaps in their

causal logics. In the market liberal story, the work disincentive effects of poor law assistance are simply assumed and treated as invariant. But let us imagine a parish in which poor law assistance primarily took the form of seasonal unemployment insurance. This was often the case in the 1820s when seasonal unemployment had become the dominant cause of poverty.<sup>58</sup> When jobs were available on local farms, able-bodied workers would not be eligible for assistance, but as demand for labor diminished in the winter months, those who had been employed would become eligible for unemployment benefits. As long as the administration of the poor law blocked those with real work opportunities from receiving these unemployment benefits, it is difficult to see any work disincentive effects. Moreover, it would have been rational for local farmers to provide this seasonal unemployment insurance or much of their labor force would be tempted to move elsewhere.<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, there is reason to believe that many parishes were administered in exactly this way. Given the small size of most rural parishes, parish officials knew well the condition of the local labor market, including whether or where vacancies or layoffs were occurring. Moreover, parish officials were not shy about denying assistance when they suspected that an individual was simply shirking.<sup>60</sup> This makes it implausible that large numbers of people were able to cheat routinely and work only when they felt like it. If large increases in poor law outlays were primarily caused by the growth of seasonal unemployment insurance, there is no reason to believe there were significant work disincentive effects.

A second causal gap is shared by both stories—a failure to focus specifically on the type of relief that sought to create employment for the unemployed. Public works projects, the employer subsidies, and workfare jobs were all efforts to deal with a growing problem of rural unemployment, and they all faced the classical dilemma involved in “make work” projects. When public agencies create employment specifically with the goal of making recipients work in exchange for relief, supervisors usually find it difficult to elicit high levels of work effort because recipients know that they are not working in a real job.<sup>61</sup> On the one side, the threat of being fired does not have the same credibility as in an ordinary employment relation. On the other, there is no particular reward for hard work since there are no prospects for promotion or greater employment security. These difficulties can be somewhat mitigated if recipients can be persuaded that success in this activity will lead to some form of real employment. But when the unemployment problem is structural and intractable, “make work” efforts are likely to be accompanied by declining morale among recipients.

Many of the specific complaints in the historical record about the corrosive effects of the Poor Law actually center on “roundsmen” or others who were engaged in these kind of “make work” activities. The Royal Commission Report quotes Mr. Hennant of Thorney Abbey, Cambridge, who describes his experience with employees hired under the labour rate system:

If I complain of the little work done, or its being ill done, the reply is, (interlarded with the grossest blackguardism,) “Oh, we don’t care a \_\_\_\_\_; if you don’t like it as it is, you may do your work yourself; for, if you discharge us, you must keep us, or have others of the same sort in our stead.”<sup>62</sup>

A similar sentiment toward such workers follows from Mr. Stephen Cadby of Westbury, Wiltshire:

The greatest evil, in my opinion, is the spirit of laziness and insubordination that it creates; if you remonstrate with these men, they abuse or injure, certain, however their conduct, they shall receive their money.<sup>63</sup>

There may be truth to these complaints, but the obvious problem is with structural unemployment that deprived so many of both meaningful work and social dignity. Moreover, there is little reason to credit fears that the attitudes of the unemployed subverted the work discipline of those who were regularly employed. It is much more logical to assume that the sight of the roundsmen would serve to reinforce the regular employees’ fear of unemployment. While they might very well sympathize with the plight of the roundsmen, they would not be eager to share that fate. There is little reason to believe that poor productivity on the part of “make work” laborers would subvert the productivity of those who were still gainfully employed.<sup>64</sup>

A third gap in causal logic can be found in the assumption that employers would deliberately lower wages to take advantage of the parish’s guaranteed wage supplement. There are several serious problems with this argument. First, we know that farmers competed with each other to attract the most skilled and energetic employees, and there was considerable employment turnover in this period.<sup>65</sup> Hence, even though trade unions were outlawed in this period, there were still limits on what employers could do.<sup>66</sup> Unilateral reductions in wage levels—even if they were balanced by poor relief supplements—seem like a perfect way to signal that a particular employer was seeking only lower quality workers. Moreover, even if all the farmers in a given parish managed to agree on a collective strategy to lower wages, they would still have to worry that the better workers would defect to higher paying farms in nearby parishes. This was a real threat because agricultural workers were often in walking distance of employment opportunities in neighboring parishes so that they could change employers.

To be sure, employers were able to impose unilateral wage cuts in periods of sharp economic downturn, but this was because employers experienced a general and simultaneous reduction in their need for workers, and rising unemployment deprived workers of any bargaining power. But in the absence of this kind of generalized downturn, there were significant obstacles to unilateral wage reductions.

Arguments that assume unilateral wage reductions mistakenly assume that the characteristics of one particular type of parish were general across the country-

side. The conventional image of eighteenth-century southern England is a homogeneous arable countryside dominated by manorial landholdings of a wealthy semi-aristocratic commercial gentry. Their farming parishes were termed “close” (today, the more easily accommodated “closed” is acceptable) because residential in-migration was restricted and controlled by a very small number of wealthy landholders who governed simultaneously as local magistrates, supervisors of the poor law officials, and employers of agricultural laborers. As a means to reduce the present and future population that would be entitled to poor law relief, this local property-owning elite sometimes made a practice of demolishing cottages that had earlier housed agricultural workers. This had the added benefit of allowing them to shift the burden of poor relief onto those living in neighboring parishes.<sup>67</sup> For their workforce, they relied instead on nonresident workers who commuted from neighboring “open” parishes—so-called because in the absence of dominating landlords, they were open to anyone who could gain settlement there.

The combination of economic and legal power exercised by these parish oligarchs caused *great* hardship for those subjected to this regime. But the existence of closed parishes hardly sustains the Speenhamland story. For one thing, even though employers in closed parishes were able to shift their poor law costs unto others, they also had to worry that lowering of wage levels might mean that vacancies went unfilled. More important, we know now that closed parishes represented a relatively small percentage of all rural parishes and an even smaller percentage of rural population. Among recent analysts, Banks is highly skeptical of the open/closed distinction, while Song who considers the distinction important finds that in Oxford in 1831, 25 percent of parishes conform to the full definition of closed with low population density, minimal poor relief outlays, and domination by a few large landholders.<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, most open parishes had a substantial number of “middling sorts”—small farmers, craftsmen, shopkeepers, and rural artisans—some of whom rotated from being recipients to being those who paid some of the taxes out of which poor relief was financed.<sup>69</sup> In their capacity both as ratepayers and as potential recipients of poor relief in bad years, it is unlikely that these middling sorts would see any reason to join with larger agricultural employers in a strategy to keep wage levels low by shifting costs on to the parish.

The final gap in causal logic has been the focus in much of this literature on adult male agricultural wages when the reality of rural life was that family income had been for generations pieced together from multiple different sources, including the earnings of wives and children and money made by men outside of their primary work.<sup>70</sup> In fact, when we look at the data on trends of male agricultural wages, the most striking thing is that they move far less dramatically than shifts in the price index. It was possible for farmers to resist more rapid adjustment of wages to price levels precisely because neither employers nor laborers assumed that working-class families could survive on the male workers’ wages alone.

This problem of focusing on male wages suggests that when the famous debate between “optimists” and “pessimists” over the impact of the Industrial Revolution on working-class standards of living shifted to the countryside, it often became a dialogue of the deaf.<sup>71</sup> At the beginning of our period—around 1790—most rural laboring families pieced together their household incomes from agricultural wage labor, including that of women and children; from periodic work in rural industries; from their own production on small plots or the parish commons; and from multiple miscellaneous sources of income such as gleaning, fishing, hunting, and casual jobs. By the end of our period, structural changes in the economy including enclosures and the decline of rural industries in Southeastern England had undermined some of these important streams of rural working-class income.<sup>72</sup> Hence, as we shall see, even if wages did not follow the trajectory outlined in the standard Speenhamland stories, the standard of living of many rural people suffered significantly in this period.

#### RECONSTRUCTING THE REALITY OF SPEENHAMLAND

The empirical complexities and causal gaps are enough to make us suspicious about both of the Speenhamland stories, but a close examination of the historical evidence is even more devastating. First, the very Speenhamland system that allegedly produced significant work disincentive effects turns out to have been far less common than earlier believed. When properly defined as strictly limited to a bread scale that provided different levels of support depending on family size, it becomes apparent that Speenhamland could not have produced the effects that have been attributed to it. Second, there is strong evidence against the decline in rural productivity that both stories have claimed to have been one of the effects of Speenhamland. Finally, when we look more closely at what happened to the rural standard of living across the period from 1790 to 1834, it is very difficult to resist the conclusion that rising poor law outlays were a response to the loss of established forms of family income rather than a cause.

#### *The Limited Pervasiveness and Episodic Nature of the Bread Scale*

*Speenhamland* is itself a contested term. Some have used it to cover the full range of relief policies in which able-bodied individuals and their families received assistance, while others have used it more narrowly to refer to the specific use of a bread scale in allocating assistance. Precisely because of the need to differentiate items number 1 and 2 from our list in Table 2 from the various forms of employment creation, we will define Speenhamland strictly as the use of a bread scale to determine assistance by the size of the family and the cost of wheat.<sup>73</sup> While the Royal Commission Report takes pains to condemn all forms of assistance to the able bodied, its initial focus is on the allowance system, and it dif-

ferentiates between parishes that occasionally provide allowances and others where such assistance has been routinized:

In others it is considered that a certain weekly sum, or more frequently the value of a certain quantity of flour or bread, is to be received by each member of a family. The latter practice has sometimes been matured into a system, forming the law of a whole district, sanctioned and enforced by the magistrates, and promulgated in the form of local statutes, under the name of *Scales*.<sup>74</sup>

This is immediately followed by the printing of a number of representative examples of such scales, including one particularly impressive table from a parish in Essex that provides precise allowances for more than twenty different wheat prices ranging from one to seven shillings per peck. Much of the report's subsequent fury is then directed against this "allowance system."

Yet few of the indictments of Speenhamland hold up against the evidence. The claim that the use of the bread scale starting in 1795 was unprecedented is simply wrong. Wage-price indexing for the able bodied goes back to the 1349-51 Ordinance and Statute of Labourers and was most elaborately spelled out in the famous 1563 Tudor Statute of Artificers (5 Eliz c 4).<sup>75</sup> Moreover, bread scales were used in years of high wheat prices at other times in the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>76</sup>

Another misperception is the belief in Speenhamland as a continuous forty-year policy with territorial and temporal uniformity. Mark Blaug first called this into question with pathbreaking research that challenged the geographical uniformity of its application.<sup>77</sup> Blaug showed that the use of the bread scale was not geographically universal even in wheat-growing areas. Neuman in a sample of sixteen parishes in Berkshire County itself found none that used the Speenhamland scale in the whole period up to 1834.<sup>78</sup> Poynter, Baugh, Huzel, Lees, and King also stress the limited use of the bread scale.<sup>79</sup> Baugh suggests that it was much more common for parishes to respond to years of very high grain prices by using poor relief funds to purchase grain that was then redistributed to households. In others, the farmers sold wheat to their employees at below-market prices or, as had happened in earlier famine years, extracharitable efforts by the rich provided some of the poor with food.<sup>80</sup>

Even so, it is useful to think of the bread scales in certain parishes in 1795 and subsequent famine years as the first Speenhamland episode. In 1795, in 1802-03, and still again in 1812, a confluence of several factors created the kind of calamity that forced many parishes to take action. In each case, two bad harvests in a row coincided with wartime limitations on agricultural imports from the Continent. The dramatic and severe upward spike in the price of wheat that followed placed this dietary staple well beyond the reach of most agricultural, rural-industrial, and even urban working people. Moreover, as the poor shifted their demand to coarser but cheaper grains, their prices spiraled upwards as well. The consequence was

severe distress and the outbreak of food riots in which protesters seized grain from middlemen and bakers.<sup>81</sup> In 1795, these riots occurred against the backdrop of revolutionary events on the other side of the English Channel, so that local elites had strong incentives to respond to the threat of famine and revolutionary disorder. The claims of Speenhamland's critics notwithstanding, the use of the bread scale as a response to famine was a very logical method to respond to these immediate crises without permanently altering wage rates or long-term relief patterns. (It is consistent with Sen's argument that famines are rooted not in absolute shortage but in problems of entitlement to food.<sup>82</sup>) As soon as the price spike passed, most households would no longer be eligible for assistance because the standard wage would purchase a sufficient amount of bread.

There are two striking features of this initial Speenhamland episode. First, there is very little difference in the trend of poor law outlays between those parishes that adopted the bread scale and those that used other means to distribute food to the hungry. Baugh analyzed data from more than seven hundred parishes in Essex, Kent, and Sussex and showed that poor relief outlays very closely tracked the fluctuations in the price of wheat (see Figure 3).<sup>83</sup> Sokoll extensively analyzed Ardleigh, a parish in Essex that did not adopt the bread scale in this early period, and he shows that its outlays also rose and fell in parallel with the other agricultural parishes in Essex that Baugh examined.<sup>84</sup> Second, as Sokoll emphasizes these patterns undermine one of the core claims of the Royal Commission Report—that allowances have a kind of addictive and self-expanding effect.<sup>85</sup> The Commissioners claimed,

Profuse allowances excite the most extravagant expectations on the parts of the claimants, who conceive that an inexhaustible fund is devoted to their use, and that they are wronged to the extent of whatever falls short of their claims.<sup>86</sup>

But in this episode, whether parishes used the formal mechanism of the bread scale or other methods of distributing relief, what is so striking is that outlays fell virtually immediately as the price of wheat fell.

The second discrete Speenhamland episode occurred in the years after the end of the Napoleonic Wars and was not related to famine conditions.<sup>87</sup> With the end of the war, there was a period of severe economic contraction marked by a dramatic decline in wheat prices (see Figures 1 and 2). There was some downward adjustment of wage rates in this period, but this adjustment was much smaller than the sharp fall in prices. As a consequence, some farms simply went out of business and other agricultural employers sharply reduced their employment levels both during the growing season and particularly during the winter months. Assisted by the introduction of threshing machines—the proximate trigger of the famous 1830 Captain Swing riots—that further reduced the demand for labor in the critical months after the harvest, all these processes significantly increased rural

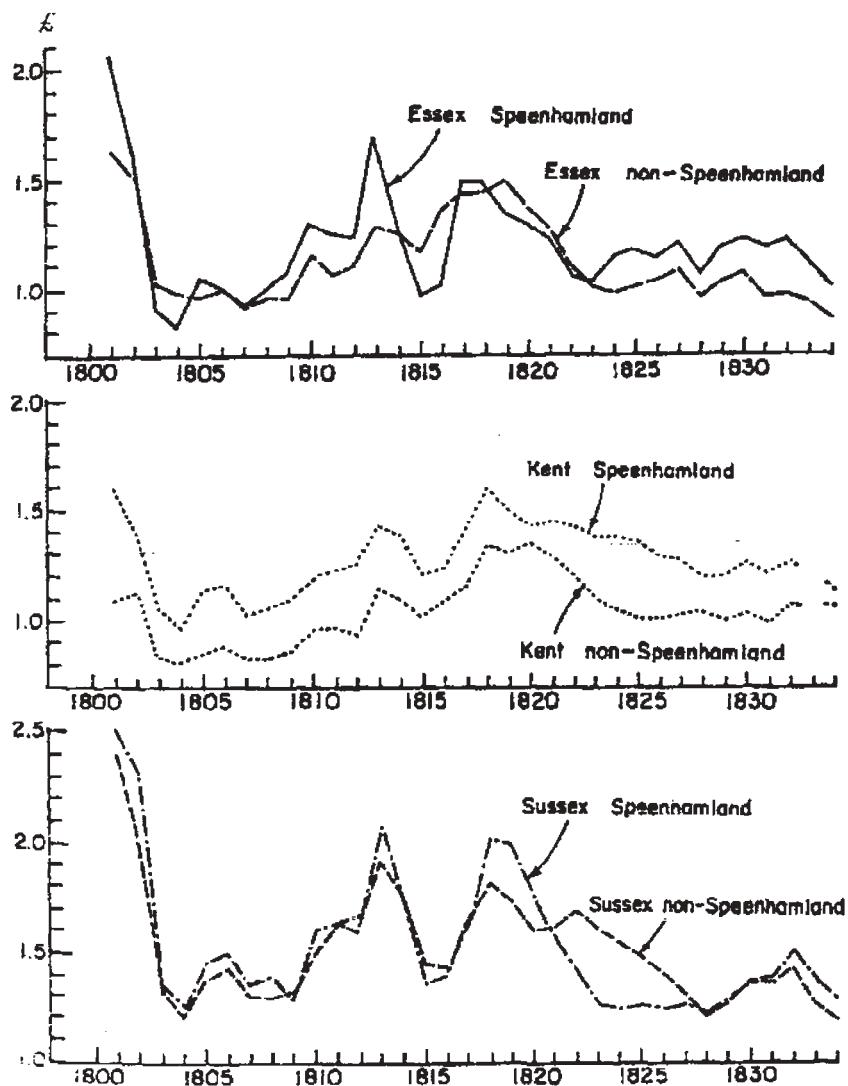


Figure 3. Per capita poor relief expenditures in Speenhamland and non-Speenhamland counties (agricultural parishes only).

Source: Thomas Sokoll, *Household and Family among the Poor* (Bochum: Universitätsverlag Dr. N. Brockmeyer, 1993), 65.

unemployment and distress and accounted for the sharp rise in poor relief outlays after 1813.<sup>88</sup>

There is strong consensus in the recent literature that the post-1813 renewal of Speenhamland measures was catalyzed by a shift from inflation to structural transformation in employment opportunities, leading primarily to radically new patterns of seasonal unemployment.<sup>89</sup> The period was also marked by the decline

of women's farm labor income and an accelerated decline of rural crafts that had provided employment for women.<sup>90</sup>

But while the bread scale returned, its meaning nonetheless shifted in an important way. In the earlier period, employed farm workers would receive an income supplement, contingent on family size and the wheat price, to help them get through the period of high food prices. In the later period, the bread scale was used primarily to determine the amount of relief that seasonally unemployed farm workers were entitled to, given the size of their families.<sup>91</sup> The importance of this seasonal dimension of poor relief is amply supported by data showing that poor relief outlays were often two or three times higher in the winter months than in the spring or summer.<sup>92</sup> As Boyer has argued extensively, there were strong reasons for parish authorities to provide relief in the winter for unemployed farm workers. Employers were constantly worried by the threat of out-migration, which would mean labor shortages during the summer months and severe shortages at harvest time.<sup>93</sup> Without such relief, levels of out-migration whether to the north or to urban areas would have been much higher.

This second phase of Speenhamland is exemplified by events in Ardleigh—the Essex parish that has been closely studied by Sokoll. The parish had no earlier history of the use of the bread scale, but a formal bread scale was instituted in September of 1823 followed in 1831 by another Speenhamland statute.<sup>94</sup> This late adoption of the bread scale by parish officials is especially notable because it occurs after decades in which Speenhamland had been denounced for its horrible consequences. This suggests that there was widespread skepticism at the time with the anti-Speenhamland rhetoric and that local officials were undeterred by the rhetoric because they were simply trying to find the best practical way to deal with the crisis presented by high levels of unemployment.

### *Trends in Productivity and Wages*

The standard Speenhamland stories insist that rural productivity collapsed in the face of the corrosive impact of the Poor Law. The available data provide no support for this claim. Total wheat production increased substantially between 1790 and 1834; Fairlie's estimate shows that wheat production fluctuated sharply between 1791 and 1811 and then more than doubled by 1834.<sup>95</sup> This increase was facilitated by an expansion in acreage; Holderness estimates that acreage increased from about 2.45 million acres in 1801 to 3.4 million in 1836—an increase of almost 39 percent.<sup>96</sup> But it wasn't only increased acreage; Holderness suggests that yields per acre might have risen by 33 percent between 1790 and 1830;<sup>97</sup> Overton suggests that the increase was 15 percent between 1801 and 1831.<sup>98</sup>

The official decennial census of population did not begin until 1801. Even then, the early censuses did not ask about employment, so estimates of the size of the agricultural labor force between 1801 and 1831 in the Southeastern counties are little more than guesswork. Nonetheless, the labor force seems to have grown

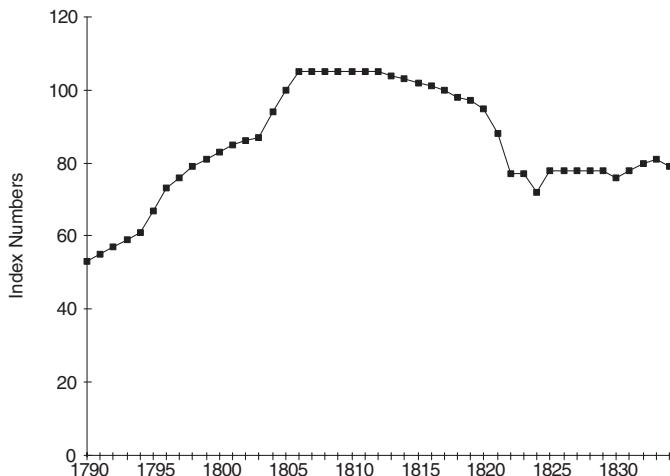


Figure 4. Agricultural wages 1790-1834.

Note: This is Bowley's series taken from B. R. Mitchell and Phyllis Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 348-49. The series is for all of England, but his reported data for specific counties in the Southeast follow the same general pattern.

substantially more slowly than either wheat output or acreage. Wrigley estimates that for the whole country, the number of adult males employed in agriculture increased from 910,000 in 1811 to 981,000 in 1831—growth of only about 8 percent.<sup>99</sup> Since the wheat-growing counties were home to a large portion of English farm workers, it is unlikely that labor force growth in these counties was substantially faster than national growth. Given the doubling of wheat output between 1811 and 1834, there can be little doubt that output per worker rose in this period. Overton suggests quite substantial increases in labor productivity in agriculture across the whole period from 1800 to 1850.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, even Clark who has been most outspoken in criticizing the idea of a productivity-increasing “agricultural revolution” in the first three decades of the nineteenth century acknowledges that labor productivity was either constant or increasing slightly in this period.<sup>101</sup>

Since the available data on productivity in the wheat-growing regions are sketchy at best, a number of analysts have supported the Speenhamland thesis by arguing that agricultural wages fell sharply in this period and that it is reasonable to see wages as a reliable proxy for productivity. Influential historians writing in the first half of the century such as Hammond and Hammond, Webb and Webb, and Mantoux have insisted that wage levels fell dramatically during the Speenhamland period.<sup>102</sup> However, most of the available data series that we have that trace rural wages in this period reveal the same basic pattern. Rural weekly wages for men rise from 1790 through to the end of the Napoleonic Wars, there is then a sharp decline during the agricultural depression, followed by a recovery and a slightly rising trend from the early 1820s through to 1834. The first system-

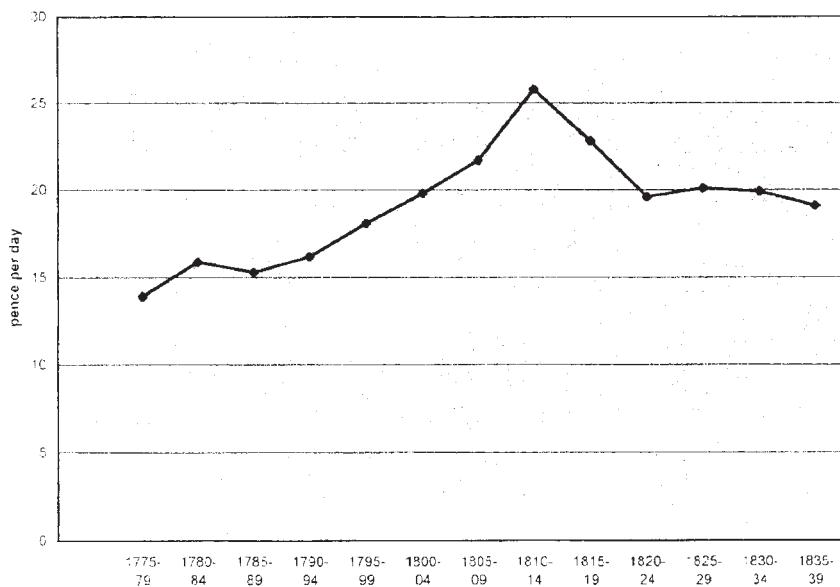


Figure 5. Winter wages of southeastern farmworkers.

Note: The chart was created from a table in an unpublished version of Greg Clark, "Farm Wages and Living Standards in the Industrial Revolution: England, 1670-1850" (University of California, Davis), 17. The series is based on between seven and twelve separate wage observations per year.

atic series on agricultural wages was developed by Bowley at the end of the nineteenth century, and it rises from 53 in 1790 to 105 in 1812, then falls to 72 in 1824 before rising to 79 in 1834 (see Figure 4).<sup>103</sup> Eccleston found a similar pattern in five Midland counties, and Richardson reports a parallel pattern in wages on a large farm in Essex.<sup>104</sup> More recently, Clark has developed a series for weekly winter wages in the southeastern counties based on various surviving estate records, including those used by Richardson, and he finds the same basic pattern (see Figure 5).<sup>105</sup> The respected historian K. D. M. Snell calculated trends in annual wages for farm servants in a number of Southern counties from a unique data set drawn from settlement examinations. For most counties or groups of counties, Snell's findings move in the same pattern as weekly wages cited elsewhere in the literature, but in some counties he did find that wages fall steadily from the 1820s onward.<sup>106</sup>

Interpreting these patterns of nominal wages has been extremely difficult because of the dramatic price changes that occur across this period. There is no question that in the famine years, such as 1795, 1802-03, and 1812, the price spike in grains lead to dramatic, albeit temporary, declines in the real wage. Nevertheless, the view advanced by Prothero that wage levels during the Napoleon War doubled while prices actually tripled is no longer accepted.<sup>107</sup> When one brackets the famine years, real agricultural wages clearly rose between 1790 and 1815.

Second, since the post-Napoleonic period was one of steadily falling price levels, the small recovery in nominal wages between 1824 and 1834 reported by Bowley understates the gain in real wages in this period.

In the end, we come to the conclusion that the question that has preoccupied so many analysts—were agricultural real wages higher or lower in 1834 than they were in 1795—is the wrong question. There are three different reasons. First, the reality was that real wages—with the critical exceptions of the famine years—first rose, then fell, and then rose. Second, when rural workers are compared to the inhabitants of urban England who had greatly expanded access to a wide variety of manufactured goods between 1790 and 1834, there can be no doubt that their relative standard of living declined sharply during this period of industrial transformation. Finally, translating weekly wages into a standard of living depends critically on the number of weeks of employment available per year, and we know that seasonal unemployment rose dramatically in the countryside after the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>108</sup>

Instead of focusing on the wrong question, then, it is the Royal Commissioners' claim that Speenhamland policies damaged rural productivity that must be scrutinized. The argument is already undermined by evidence that the bread scale was not pervasive or continuous. It is further weakened by both the data on agricultural output and the trends in weekly wages that provide no support for a claimed collapse of rural productivity.

### *Household Income and the Poor Law*

It is precisely because of the variety and variability of the income sources on which families relied that it is extremely difficult to identify any clear trends in average family income across this period. The best estimates that we have come from surviving family budget data that have been compiled by Horrell and Humphries.<sup>109</sup> They indicate that for the low-wage agricultural sector—that tends to overlap with the southeastern counties—there was a small upward trend in real household income between 1790 and 1834. But this average figure conceals much variation, and poor relief outlays represented a rising component of family income, rising from a negligible level in the early period to 8 percent of family income for the 1821-40 period. In this context, poor relief can best be understood as a mechanism to sustain family income in a context in which it had become increasingly difficult for the rural poor—through no fault of their own—to piece together an adequate income.

The increasing importance of poor relief can be seen as compensating for three broad trends. First, rural craft industries suffered a dramatic decline in the southeastern counties in the period after 1790.<sup>110</sup> Some of this decline had been going on for centuries, but the pace of decline was clearly accelerated by the rapid rise of industrial production in the northern part of the country.<sup>111</sup> This meant that opportunities for family members, especially women, to supplement income with labor

on rural craft production simply disappeared in many places. Second, enclosures and consolidations of holdings meant that many rural laboring families lost the capacity to earn additional income by keeping farm animals or maintaining a vegetable garden. In fact, during the Speenhamland period, a major alternative to the poor law that was widely debated was to provide laboring families with allotments—small pieces of land—that would make self-provisioning a real alternative to poor relief in hard times.<sup>112</sup> But while the idea was widely discussed, it was never implemented beyond a few localities. Third, particularly after 1813, the demand for farm labor diminishes, so that there are reduced earning opportunities for wives and children while men experienced longer periods of unemployment in the winter and early spring months.<sup>113</sup> Reay, for example, finds that in one Kent Parish, 60 percent of farm laborers and small farmers required poor relief during the winter months in the 1830s.<sup>114</sup>

In short, the family budget data provide a different angle of vision that further undermines the conventional Speenhamland stories. Instead of bread scales undermining work effort, we get a picture of a rural population facing broad structural forces that undermine their capacities for self-support. In this context it is difficult to see increasing poor relief as anything but a partial remedy to problems outside the control of the rural poor.

#### A REVISIONIST NARRATIVE

The strength of the evidence against the standard Speenhamland stories raises the obvious question of why the past forty years of historical scholarship have not yet had any significant impact on social policy discussions. There are undoubtedly multiple reasons but two are especially compelling. The first is that the Malthusian foundation on which the perversity thesis rests followed the logic of Newtonian physics. Just as Newton explained the causal logic behind the fall of an apple not by the simple appearance of things but by explicating the real, albeit hidden, law of gravity, so Malthus explained the perverse consequences of poor relief not by citing data but by invoking a hidden and constant causal logic. By insisting that there was a deeper truth than that of empirical “appearances,” Malthus effectively insulated his argument from empirical disconfirmation.<sup>115</sup> This is the reason the perversity thesis has been so effortlessly recycled to analyze poverty populations who live under radically different conditions than those of the Speenhamland epoch. The second is that since the revisionist work has been produced by a theoretically diverse group of scholars, the findings have not been organized into a coherent alternative account. As of yet, a counter–perversity thesis approach to Speenhamland lacks a compelling narrative structure.

It seems useful, therefore, to suggest an alternative narrative that would place these new historical findings into a framework that social policy analysts might find compelling. This alternative narrative centers on the problems of legitimating the new science of political economy that emerged out of the fundamental contri-

butions of Malthus and Ricardo. Malthus and Ricardo famously disagreed on some key theoretical and policy issues, and later thinkers, such as Marx and Keynes, explicitly embraced one while denigrating the other.<sup>116</sup> But there was also much agreement between the two figures, and ultimately it was Malthus's critique of the Poor Law that helped divert attention from the negative consequences of Ricardo's first great policy success—the decision at the end of the Napoleonic Wars to restore the pound's parity to its prewar level. In short, the construction of the Speenhamland story was intimately connected to Britain's embrace of the gold standard.

### *The Return to Gold*

As described earlier, the second Speenhamland episode resulted from the severe agricultural downturn at the end of the Napoleonic Wars that led to significant increases in Poor Law outlays. But the most important fact is that the agricultural downturn was not just a brief postwar interlude; rather it became a long-term reality continuing through and beyond the passage of the New Poor Law in 1834.<sup>117</sup> But the rural distress was itself closely linked to policy decisions, especially England's decision to restore the prewar value of the pound in relation to gold. What happened in this period is remarkably similar to the decision by England to restore the prewar relationship between the pound and gold after World War I. Keynes had famously denounced this policy as deeply misguided and insisted that it would produce a period of intense deflationary pressure.<sup>118</sup> Less recognized is that Keynes's prescience derived from his knowledge of economic history and the history of economic theory. He realized that English statesmen in the post–World War I era were simply repeating the mistake that had been made—at the urging of David Ricardo—a century earlier.<sup>119</sup> Ricardo argued forcefully for restoring the pound to its prewar parity from his first publication in 1810 of a pamphlet called “The High Price of Bullion.”<sup>120</sup> He insisted that the wartime inflation was a direct consequence of the suspension of gold convertibility and that the only way to return prices to their proper level was to restore the prewar parity. His views and those of other bullionists were endorsed by the parliamentary Bullion Committee in its 1810 Report. By 1816, Ricardo had retired from business, and he reasserted his advocacy of a return to gold with a pamphlet titled “A Proposal for an Economical and Secure Currency.” With the publication of Ricardo's *Principles* in 1817 and his entrance to Parliament in 1819, his influence on public policy became greater and was central to the government's decision to restore gold to its prewar parity in 1819.<sup>121</sup>

This restoration, however, occurred against the backdrop of a severe rural crisis that had begun right at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. The fall in wheat prices in 1813 and 1814 produced a massive collapse of rural banks that had failed to hold on to any reserves. Between 1814 and 1816, 240 rural banks stopped payments leading to a destruction of wealth and a disappearance of credit.<sup>122</sup> The result was a

dramatic increase in unemployment as both farmers and other employers were forced to cut back both investment and the size of their labor force. But as the deflation took hold, there was an ironic consequence—the value of the pound started to rise so that the goal of restoring the prewar parity appeared substantially closer. The response of the authorities in 1816 and 1817, therefore, was to prepare for the resumption of gold payments at the old parity, and in May of 1819, Parliament passed legislation to restore gold payments within two years.<sup>123</sup> While there is intense controversy over the specific policies that the government and Bank followed in restoring gold, there is widespread consensus that the sustained effort to return to the prewar parity had a profoundly deflationary impact. On the one side, the government was precluded from pursuing the kind of countercyclical policies that could have revived the rural economy. On the other, the sustained tight money policies greatly restricted the availability of the credit that farmers desperately needed.

Moreover, the deflationary pressures did not end with the success of restoration; the gold standard simply made the pressures on the rural economy permanent. Wheat prices continued to fall until 1829, and after that, prices were stabilized at a very low level. The failure of rural banks was also continuous across the whole period from 1815 to 1830.<sup>124</sup> This context of falling prices and limited credit forced farmers to reduce labor costs and that, in turn, produced chronic rural unemployment and increased use of poor relief. The ongoing pressure of low wheat prices forced the more successful farmers to put increasing resources into labor-saving technology such as the threshing machine. Since hand threshing of wheat could represent as much as one-quarter of the whole year's quantity of farm work, mechanization had a huge impact on the rural demand for labor in the winter months.<sup>125</sup> Triggered by these high rates of unemployment, the machine smashing in the Captain Swing riots of 1830 exploded.<sup>126</sup> This outbreak of rural disorder played a key role in undermining elite support for the Old Poor Law.<sup>127</sup>

Absent Ricardo's eloquent pleas for a restoration of the prewar parity, policy makers might well have chosen a less deflationary set of policies. Had the rural economy not suffered the additional shock of the deflationary pressures of gold, the wheat-growing areas might have experienced a recovery and an earlier rebound of wheat prices. Without the ideological commitment to laissez-faire policies, moreover, the government might have embraced policies that helped to cushion the economy in periods of contracting demand, including provisions for a steady flow of credit to farmers.<sup>128</sup> Under any set of policies, there would ultimately have been a problem of a rural labor surplus that could only be solved by more rapid rates of out-migration. But the Ricardian policies dramatically intensified the problem—so that this massive readjustment had to be handled over twenty years rather than forty. As Polanyi eloquently argues, government policies can help protect ordinary people simply by slowing the rate of change, but the

Ricardian policies did exactly the opposite; they vastly accelerated the problem of rural surplus population.<sup>129</sup>

### *Malthus, Parliament, and the Road to the New Poor Law*

The New Poor Law of 1834 officially placed the blame for the rural distress not on macroeconomic policies but on the Speenhamland system that had allegedly demoralized and degraded the rural poor. But the Royal Commissioner's "solution" did not emerge automatically out of the reality of rural distress. The solution had to be politically and rhetorically constructed, and this construction depended, in turn, on two prior conditions—dramatic changes both in elite opinion and in the political system. In short, the path from Malthus's *Essay* to the Royal Commission Report was hardly simple.

Ironically, the influence of Malthus's call for abolition of the Poor Law probably reached its high point in the period between 1815 and 1818—even before the return to gold. Repeated editions of the *Essay*, along with reprints of Townsend's pamphlet, were extraordinarily influential in shaping elite views. Poynter suggests that

it was in these years that fundamental disapproval of a legal provision for the poor (and especially for the able-bodied) became sufficiently widespread to be regarded as orthodox, while defence of the Poor Law became, if not quite heretical, at least old-fashioned.<sup>130</sup>

The influence was reflected in a series of Parliamentary Reports, culminating with reports in 1817 and 1819 that endorsed the call for abolition of the Poor Laws.<sup>131</sup>

Yet this intellectual influence did not translate into legislation in this period because there was no consensus within the Parliament on the right course of action. In addition to the usual conflicts among factions, some in Parliament were reluctant to abolish the Poor Laws out of the same fear of revolution that had produced the original Speenhamland policy in 1795. Rural unrest was acute in this period, and the unreformed Parliament had good reason to fear that abolition might generate broad protests that would bring together rural laborers, urban workers, and middle-class radicals.<sup>132</sup>

After 1820, the political strength of the abolitionist position seems to have weakened, but the parliamentary impasse continued. While there were initiatives at the local level to "reform" poor relief to limit outlays, there were still wide disagreements about what to do about rural distress.<sup>133</sup> The situation was complicated by further economic downturns between 1819 and 1822 and again in 1825 to 1826. The continuing economic strains generated intense criticisms of the return to gold and calls for aggressive government action to revive the economy. An explicitly anti-Ricardian political economy emerged in this period that drew some of its key inspiration from Malthus's rejection of the view that supply cre-

ates its own demand.<sup>134</sup> These underconsumptionist thinkers directly challenged the government's laissez-faire policies and argued for cheaper money, an expansion of rural credit, and programs of public works to increase employment and demand. But these arguments had little impact on government policies.

The Captain Swing riots in 1830 gave new urgency to Poor Law debates. Yet the parliamentary stalemate was not broken until the Whigs came to power and passed the Reform Act of 1832 that expanded the suffrage and gave the middle class effective representation.<sup>135</sup> While the Reform Act was still pending, the Whig government appointed the Royal Commission to investigate the Poor Laws. While all of the Commissioners had been deeply influenced by Malthus's arguments, they rejected his abolitionist policy solution. Their critical rhetorical move was to adopt the language of reform and to argue that "reformed parishes"—those that replaced outdoor relief with workhouses for the poor—had effectively eliminated all of the negative consequences of Speenhamland. In short, by narrowing Malthus's critique of the Poor Law to focus on the "allowance system" and by proposing concrete reforms rather than abolition, the Royal Commission was able to generate a strong parliamentary consensus that led to passage of the New Poor Law.<sup>136</sup>

What the Royal Commissioners succeeded in doing was to mobilize and modify Malthus's arguments to rescue political economy from its responsibility for the plight of the rural poor. By effectively blaming the victims for the macroeconomic policy mistakes that had intensified rural poverty, they turned a potential disaster into a policy triumph. In doing this, they made an enormous contribution to the legitimization of political economy. The severity of the agricultural downturn might well have undermined the whole belief in laissez-faire and self-regulating markets. Classical political economy was in its infancy in this period, and its ultimate maturation and worldwide influence were hardly a foregone conclusion.<sup>137</sup> While it is difficult to think through such a radical counterfactual, an alternative and more pragmatic strand of economic thinking might have become institutionalized in the place of the Ricardo tradition. Instead, the ultimate policy triumph of the New Poor Law diverted attention from the new science's first major policy failure and solidified the electorate's faith in market self-regulation.

In sum, the Speenhamland myth was created in the years of agricultural downturn to divert blame for a deep agricultural crisis away from government policy and toward the rural poor who were the major victims of the economic downturn. Since the decision taken by the government on Ricardo's advice to restore the pre-war parity of the pound intensified the rural depression, the mythology worked to cover up the first major policy failure of the new science of political economy. The importance of this myth becomes apparent in thinking about the diffusion of economic liberalism during the course of the nineteenth century. England's ability to persuade other countries to adopt free trade, the gold standard, and the belief in market self-regulation depended on its ability to present itself as a great economic

success story.<sup>138</sup> Were other societies aware that the price that England had paid for economic liberalism was severe economic hardship in the countryside in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, both the English model and its policy ideas would have been considerably tarnished. By shifting the blame for the problems on to Speenhamland and all its pernicious evils, the economic liberals successfully reframed the agricultural downturn into a problem of individual morality and an enduring parable of the dangers of government “interference” with the market.

#### CONCLUSION

The major lesson that we learn from this study is a renewed appreciation for the persuasive power of the metaphors of nature, natural laws, and the “science” of political economy to influence how history is experienced and why certain explanations for distress triumph over others. The critical point is that the Malthusian morality tale about the disastrous consequences of Poor Relief was produced before any evidence had been gathered and too early for the Speenhamland decision to have produced its alleged consequences. In Malthus’s 1798 *Essay on Population*, all the elements of the story line are already in place. Poor relief, by ending the scarcity that is endemic to nature in its untouched state, destroys both the incentive to work in order to eat as well as those to control childbirth and thus leads to a precipitous decline in productivity and a rapid growth of the pauper populations. The only way to return the poor to their natural state of self-discipline in both work and procreation is to abolish the system of poor relief and return to the natural state of scarcity and the human discipline it teaches.

In subsequent years, as political economy gained the privileged status of a recognized science, this story was repeated so frequently by political economists, the clergy, and various Parliamentary commissions that it gained the quality of truth. By the time the Royal Commission was created, a newly reformed parliament included a significant number of factory owners determined to create an available, cheap, and “free” labor force; the thesis was elevated to an absolute Scientific Truth based entirely on the laws of nature. Despite volumes of literature devoted to the subject, it took the next 130 years before there was a serious scholarly effort to show the shallowness and distortions of that document. But even after years of detailed scholarly work had effectively debunked the Speenhamland legend, contemporary social welfare theorists were successful in mobilizing precisely the same story line to discredit current welfare institutions. Charles Murray’s influential 1984 book, *Losing Ground*, simply updated the old story to argue that an excessively generous welfare system in the United States had undermined both the work ethic and sexual restraint among the poor.<sup>139</sup> Moreover, the work of Murray and like-minded scholars played a critical role in creating the climate for the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act that eliminated the entitlement of poor children to government assistance.

Our review of the historical evidence suggests two conclusions. First, the perversity story lacks empirical support. The experience of the Speenhamland period is that poor relief did not hurt the poor; it helped to protect them from structural changes in the economy that had made it far more difficult for people to earn a living. Second, the doubts that have hung over guaranteed income proposals since Speenhamland lack historical foundation. While it is theoretically possible that a floor under incomes would be transformed into a ceiling, this certainly did not happen during the Speenhamland period, and there is little evidence that it has ever happened. In fact, there are good reasons this theoretical possibility is rarely likely to occur in practice. In contrast to Speenhamland, most contemporary income guarantee proposals, including variants on the negative income tax, do not require that recipients work. Hence, when employees are faced with an employer who is progressively lowering wages to take advantage of the income guarantee program, they are likely to quit and look for alternative employment since they know that they will be protected by the income guarantee from economic hardship during their period of unemployment. Moreover, under most circumstances, employers avoid unilateral reductions in wages precisely out of the fear that they would drive away existing employees and make it harder to fill vacancies. It seems only logical that if an income guarantee were in place, employers would become even more cautious about imposing wage cuts.

Welfare and income maintenance policies need to be debated free of the mythologies that were created two hundred years ago. Above all, we need to move beyond the naturalized Malthusian accounts that see the behavior of the poor as always determined by their biological drives. Discarding the naturalizing blinders and examining the actual situation of the rural poor during the Speenhamland period, we are forced to recognize the central role of larger economic processes such as the severe agricultural deflation and the shift of industry to the North in explaining mounting rural poverty. Relief payments actually provided some protection against these structural pressures. The contemporary lesson is obvious; it is time to reject the ideological claim that the best way to fight poverty is by imposing increasingly stringent conditions on ever shrinking transfer payments to poor households.

#### NOTES

1. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (1944; reprint, Boston: Beacon, 2001), chap. 6-7.
2. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Politics of a Guaranteed Income: The Nixon Administration and the Family Assistance Plan* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 179.
3. Ibid., 179-80.
4. Luiza Chwialkowska, "Subsidies Paid in Loaves of Bread in England in 1700s," *National Post* (Canada), 12 December 2000, A6.
5. Recent writings in favor of the basic income idea include Philippe Van Parijs, ed., *Arguing for Basic Income: Ethical Foundations for a Radical Reform* (London: Verso, 1992); Fred Block and Jeff Manza, "Could We End Poverty in a Postindustrial Society?

The Case for a Progressive Negative Income Tax," *Politics & Society* 25 (December 1997): 473-511; and some of the pieces included in Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, *What's Wrong with a Free Lunch?* (Boston: Beacon, 2001).

6. Barry Bluestone and Teresa Ghilarducci, "Rewarding Work," *The American Prospect* 7, no. 26 (May-June 1996): 40-46; David Howell, "Block and Manza on the Negative Income Tax," *Politics & Society* 24, no. 4 (December 1997): 533-39; Alain Clement, "Revenue Minimum: Les Lecons de Speenhamland," *Lien Social et Politique* 42 (1997): 49-60.

7. Albert Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility and Jeopardy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). See also Gail Reekie, *Measuring Immorality: Social Inquiry and the Problem of Legitimacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Joseph Persky, "Classical Family Values: Ending the Poor Law as They Knew Them," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 11, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 178-89.

8. Martin Anderson, *Welfare: The Political Economy of Welfare Reform in the United States* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1978).

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10. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (New York: Knopf, 1984).

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12. Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1992).

13. R. Kent Weaver, *Ending Welfare as We Know It* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2000).

14. Mark Greenberg, "Bush's Blunder," *The American Prospect*, Special Supplement on Reforming Welfare Reform, Summer 2002, A2-A5.

15. Key works include Mark Blaug, "The Myth of the Old Poor Law and the Making of the New," *Journal of Economic History* XXIII, no. 2 (June 1963): 151-245; Mark Blaug, "The Poor Law Report Reexamined," *Journal of Economic History* XXIV (June 1964): 229-45; D. A. Baugh, "The Cost of Poor Relief in South-East England 1790-1834," *Economic History Review* XXVII, no. 1 (February 1975): 50-68; J. D. Marshall, *The Old Poor Law, 1795-1834*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1985); K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); James Huzel, "The Labourer and the Poor Law," in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vol. 6, edited by G. E. Mingay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 755-809; George R. Boyer, *An Economic History of the Poor Law 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Thomas Sokoll, *Household and Family among the Poor* (Bochum: Universitätsverlag Dr. N. Brockmeyer, 1993); Lynn H. Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Steven King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700-1850: A Regional Perspective* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

16. To be sure, this literature does not speak with one voice, and many important issues of historical interpretation continue to be debated.

17. Polanyi, *Transformation*, chap. 10; Giovanna Procacci, "Social Economy and the Government of Poverty," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, edited by Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 151-68.

18. *Ibid.*, chap. 7; Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government: English Poor Law History. Part 1: The Old Poor Law* (London: Longmans, Green, 1927), 168-89.

19. Among the most important reports were Parliamentary Papers, *Report from the Select Committee on the Poor Laws* (1817), *Report from the Committee on the Poor Laws* (1819), and *Report from the Select Committee on Labourers Wages* (1824). The Royal Commission Report was published as *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws* (London: B. Fellowes, 1834).

20. Blaug, "Myth of the Old Poor Law"; Blaug, "Reexamined"; Marshall, *Old Poor Law*; S. E. Finer, "The Transmission of Benthamite Ideas 1820-1850," in *Studies in the Growth of Nineteenth-Century Government*, edited by Gillian Sutherland (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1972), 11-32; Raymond G. Cowherd, *Political Economists and the English Poor Laws* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1977), chap. ix-x; Ursula R. Q. Henriques, *Before the Welfare State: Social Administration in Early Industrial Britain* (London: Longmans, 1979), chap. 2.

21. In addition to the cites in the previous note, see Anthony Brundage, *The Making of the New Poor Law: The Politics of Inquiry, Enactment, and Implementation, 1832-1839* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1978); Boyer, *Economic History*, 60-65.

22. Joseph Townsend, *A Dissertation on the Poor Laws* (1786; reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

23. Cited in Polanyi, *Transformation*, 118.

24. Ibid., 119.

25. T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798; reprint, London: Penguin, 1985). In the second edition, published in 1803, Malthus did acknowledge Townsend's pamphlet; Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 2d ed. (1803; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

26. Malthus, *Essay*, 70.

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28. Townsend, *Dissertation*, 17.

29. Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, translated by W. O. Henderson and W. H. Chaloner (1845; reprint, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958).

30. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 2, translated by Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1930), 662. This is a translation in two volumes of the fourth German edition of Book One of *Kapital* that had been published in 1890.

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34. J. R. McCulloch, *The Literature of Political Economy* (1845; reprint, London: London School of Economics, 1938), 290.
35. Cited in Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government: English Poor Law History. Part II: The Last Hundred Years* (1929; reprint, Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1963), 84.
36. Ibid., 83.
37. Ibid., 86-88.
38. Ibid., 54.
39. Blaug, "Myth of the Old Poor Law," "Report Reexamined."
40. Polanyi, *Transformation*, 298-99. On Polanyi in Vienna, see Kari Polanyi-Levitt and Marguerite Mendell, "Karl Polanyi: His Life and Times," *Studies in Political Economy* 22 (Spring 1987), and Lee Congdon, "The Sovereignty of Society: Polanyi in Vienna," in *The Life and Work of Karl Polanyi*, edited by Kari Polanyi-Levitt (Montreal: Black Rose, 1990), 78-84.
41. For more on Polanyi's analysis of Speenhamland, see Fred Block, "Karl Polanyi and the Writing of *The Great Transformation*," *Theory and Society*, forthcoming.
42. Polanyi, *Transformation*, 85.
43. Ibid., 103.
44. G. D. H. Cole, "Notes on *The Great Transformation*," 5 November 1943, in the Karl Polanyi Archive, Concordia University, Montreal.
45. Polanyi did try to respond to some of Cole's criticisms in the additional note on "Poor Law and the Organization of Labor" that he appended to the 1945 edition of the book. But while Polanyi added some qualifications to his argument, he did not change its main thrust.
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49. Lindert, "Poor Relief," 114.
50. Sokoll, *Household and Family*; King, *Poverty and Welfare*; Huzel, "The Labourer and the Poor Law."
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56. Charles Feinstein, "Pessimism Perpetuated: Real Wages and the Standard of Living in Britain during the Industrial Revolution," *Journal of Economic History* 58, no. 3 (1998): 625-58; Greg Clark, "Farm Wages and Living Standards in the Industrial Revolution: England, 1670-1869," *Economic History Review* LIV, no. 3 (2001): 477-505.

57. Snell, *Annals*; James Stephen Taylor, *Poverty, Migration, and Settlement in the Industrial Revolution: Sojourners' Narratives* (Palo Alto, CA: Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, 1989); Hitchcock, King, and Sharpe, *Chronicling Poverty*; Valenze, *Industrial Woman*.

58. Boyer, *Economic History*, 86-93.

59. Ibid.

60. Sharpe, "Companion," 99-103.

61. Webb and Webb, *Old Poor Law*, 221-40, provides the classic account of the failure of numerous efforts to make profits from the labor of those who were in need of relief.

62. Her Majesty's Royal Commissioners, *Report*, 223.

63. Ibid.

64. On the other hand, high rates of unemployment certainly played a role in radicalizing employed farm workers, such as those who participated in the Captain Swing rebellion in 1830. One of the main targets of the rebels was the threshing machines that increased seasonal unemployment. See Hobsbawm and Rude, *Captain Swing*; Andrew Charlesworth, ed., *An Atlas of Rural Protest in Britain 1548-1900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), chap. 6; Barry Reay, *The Last Rising of the Agricultural Labourers: Rural Life and Protest in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990); Roger Wells, "The Moral Economy of the English Countryside," in *Moral Economy and Popular Protest: Crowds, Conflict and Authority*, edited by Adrian Randall and Andrew Charlesworth (Houndsmill: Macmillan, 2000), 209-71.

65. A. S. Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Snell, *Annals*.

66. John Rule, *The Experience of Labour* (London: Croon Helm, 1979); John Rule and Roger Wells, *Crime, Protest, and Popular Politics in Southern England, 1750-1850: The Formative Years* (London: Longman, 1988); C.R. Dobson, *Masters and Journeymen: A Pre-history of Industrial Relations, 1717-1800* (London: Croon Helm, 1980).

67. B. A. Holderness, "'Open' and 'Close' Parishes in England in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Agricultural History Review* 20 (1972): 125-39; D. R. Mills, *Lord and Peasant in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Croom Helm, 1980). See also the discussion on p. 601 in Margaret Somers, "Citizenship and the Place of the Public Sphere: Law, Community, and Political Culture in the Transition to Democracy," *American Sociological Review* 58, no. 5 (October 1993): 587-620.

68. Sarah Banks, "Nineteenth-Century Scandal or Twentieth Century Model? A New Look at 'Open' and 'Close' Parishes," *Economic History Review* XLI, no. 1 (February 1988): 51-73; Byung Khun Song, "Landed Interest, Local Government, and the Labour Market in England, 1750-1850," *Economic History Review* LI, no. 3 (1998): 465-88.
69. Boyer, *Economic History*; Sokoll, *Household and Family*.
70. Krishan Kumar, "Employment and Unemployment: The English Experience," in *On Work: Historical, Comparative, and Theoretical Approaches*, edited by R. E. Pahl (London: Blackwell, 1988), 138-64; Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, "Women's Labour Force Participation and the Transition to the Male-Breadwinner Family, 1790-1865," *Economic History Review* XLVII, no. 1 (February 1995); Barry Reay, *Microhistories: Demography, Society and Culture in Rural England, 1800-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 89-117; Berg, *Age of Manufacturers*; Valenze, *Industrial Woman*.
71. On the standard of living debate, see Arthur J. Taylor, ed., *The Standard of Living in Britain in the Industrial Revolution* (London: Methuen, 1975).
72. Snell, *Annals*, chap. 1; Reay, *Microhistories*.
73. Our definition of Speenhamland also excludes child allowances. The justification is simply practical—to make the story more manageable. Child allowances represented only a small proportion of poor law outlays and played little role in arguments about work disincentives. Moreover, this article will not address the issue of child allowances as a possible encouragement to excess fertility.
74. Her Majesty's Royal Commissioners, *Report*, 21.
75. R. H. Tawney and Eileen Power, eds., *Tudor Economic Documents*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, 1924), 338-50; R. H. Tawney, "The Assessment of Wages in England by the Justices of the Peace," in *Wage Regulation in Pre-industrial England*, edited by W. E. Minchinton (1938; reprint, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1972), 37-92; Ephraim E. Lipson, *The Economic History of England*, vol. 3 (London: A. and C. Black, 1943), 253; Somers, "Citizenship"; Margaret Somers, "Rights, Relationality and Membership: Rethinking the Making and Meaning of Citizenship," *Law and Social Inquiry* 19, no. 1 (1994): 1301-50.
76. Ursula R. Q. Henriques, *Before the Welfare State: Social Administration in Early Industrial Britain* (London: Longman, 1979); Mark Neuman, *The Speenhamland County: Poverty and the Poor Laws in Berkshire, 1782-1834* (New York: Garland, 1982).
77. Blaug, "Myth of the Old Poor Law" and "Reexamined."
78. Neuman, *Speenhamland County*, 160.
79. J. R. Poynter, *Society and Pauperism: English Ideas on Poor Relief, 1795-1834* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1969), 79-85; Baugh, "Cost of Poor Relief"; Huzel, "Labourer and the Poor Law"; Lees, *Solidarities*; King, *Poverty and Welfare*.
80. Baugh, "Cost of Poor Relief," 59.
81. The best account of these famine years is Roger A. E. Wells, *Wretched Faces: Famine in Wartime England, 1793-1801* (Gloucester, UK: Sutton, 1988); see also Charles Tilly, *Popular Contentions in Great Britain 1758-1834* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 228-32.
82. Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982).
83. Baugh, "Cost of Poor Relief."
84. Sokoll, *Household and Family*, 138.
85. Ibid., 142.
86. Her Majesty's Royal Commissioners, *Report*, 49.

87. Napoleon abdicated for the first time in early April 1814 and then returned from Elba for three more months of war in 1815. Hence, in annual series, 1813 generally marks the peak of the wartime boom since it was the last full year of war.

88. On the threshing machine, see N. E. Fox, "The Spread of the Threshing Machine in Central Southern England," *Agricultural History Review* 26, no. 1 (1978): 26-28. On Swing, see Hobsbawm and Rude, *Captain Swing*. On the rise in unemployment, see Norman Gash, "Rural Unemployment, 1815-1834," *Economic History Review* VI, no. 1 (October 1935): 90-93; Snell, *Annals*; Boyer, *Economic History*.

89. Note, for example, that Snell, *Annals*, and Boyer, *Economic History*, agree on this point.

90. Berg, *Age of Manufacturers*; Valenze, *Industrial Woman*; Snell, *Annals*.

91. With this change in meaning, there was also a change in generosity. The post-1813 scales, even holding the price of wheat constant, were considerably less generous than those used in famine years. But the famine payments established a floor for full-time employed workers, while the post-1813 payments were going to households of unemployed workers. For a somewhat misleading comparison of the scales, see Hammond and Hammond, *Village Labourers*, 181-82.

92. F. G. Emmison, "The Relief of the Poor at Eaton Socon, 1706-1834," *Publication of the Bedfordshire Historical Record Society* 15 (1933): 3-98; Snell, *Annals*; Boyer, *Economic History*; Reay, *Microhistories*.

93. Boyer, *Economic History*, 31-43.

94. Sokoll, *Household and Family*, 140.

95. These estimates are cited on pp. 1054-55 in A. H. John, "Statistical Appendix," in *Agrarian History*, vol. 6, 972-1155.

96. B. A. Holderness, "Prices, Productivity and Output," in *Agrarian History*, vol. 6, 84-189.

97. Ibid., 140.

98. Mark Overton, "Agricultural Revolution? England 1540-1850," in *New Directions in Economic and Social History*, edited by Anne Digby and Charles Feinstein (Houndsmill: Macmillan, 1989), 9-21. Eric Jones estimated that yields per acre rose 16 percent between 1815-19 and 1832-36; see E. L. Jones, "The Agricultural Labor Market in England, 1793-1872," in *Agriculture and the Industrial Revolution*, edited by E. L. Jones (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), 211-33.

99. E. A. Wrigley, "Men on the Land and Men in the Countryside: Employment in Agriculture in Early-Nineteenth Century England," in *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure*, edited by Lloyd Bonfield, Richard M. Smith, and Keith Wrightson (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 295-336.

100. Mark Overton, "Re-establishing the English Agricultural Revolution," *Agricultural History Review* 44, no. 1 (1996): 1-20.

101. Greg Clark, "Labour Productivity in English Agriculture, 1300-1860," in *Land, Labour and Livestock: Historical Studies in European Agricultural Productivity*, edited by Bruce M. S. Campbell and Mark Overton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 211-35, and "Too Much Revolution: Agriculture and the Industrial Revolution, 1700-1860," in *The British Industrial Revolution: An Economic Assessment*, 2d ed., edited by Joel Mokyr (Boulder: Westview, 1999), 206-40.

102. Hammond and Hammond, *Village Labourer*, chap. 7; Webb and Webb, *Old Poor Law*, 422-23; Paul Mantoux, *The Industrial Revolution in the Eighteenth Century* (1928; reprint, New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 431-39.

103. Bowley's figures are cited in B. R. Mitchell and Phyllis Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 348-49.

104. Bernard Eccleston, "Malthus, Wages and the Labour Market in England 1790-1830," in *Malthus and His Time*, edited by Michael Turner (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), 143-56; T. L. Richardson, "Agricultural Labourers' Wages and the Cost of Living in Essex, 1790-1840: A Contribution to the Standard of Living Debate," in *Land, Labour and Agriculture, 1700-1920: Essays for Gordon Mingay*, edited by B. A. Holderness and Michael Turner (London: Hambledon, 1991), 70-90.
105. Clark, "Farm Wages."
106. Snell, *Annals*, 412-17.
107. Rowland Prothero, *English Farming Past and Present* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), 313-15.
108. Snell, *Annals*; Boyer, *Economic History*.
109. Horrell and Humphries, "Women's Labour Force."
110. Snell, *Annals*; Robert C. Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 246-48; Boyer, *Economic History*, 38-42.
111. Pat Hudson, *The Genesis of Industrial Capital: A Study of the West Riding Wool Textile Industry, c. 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Pat Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution* (London: E. Arnold, 1992); Hudson, *Regions and Industries*; Kriedte, *Industrialization before Industrialization*.
112. D. C. Barnett, "Allotments and the Problem of Rural Poverty, 1740-1840," in *Land, Labour and Population in the Industrial Revolution*, edited by E. L. Jones and G. E. Mingay (London: Edward Arnold, 1967), 162-83.
113. Drawing on settlement hearings, Snell, *Annals*, argues that there was a significant decline in women's employment opportunities in the wheat-growing regions from the 1790s onward. However, Horrell and Humphries, "Women's Labour Force," use family budget data to show women and children providing an increasing share of family income in the later period.
114. Reay, *Microhistories*, 129; see also Emmison, "Relief of the Poor."
115. Malthus's distrust of appearances is indicated by the following passage:
- If I saw a glass of wine repeatedly presented to a man, and he took no notice of it, I should be apt to think that he was blind or uncivil. A juster philosophy might teach me rather to think that my eyes deceived me and that the offer was not really what I conceived it to be. (Malthus, *Essay*, 70)
116. Marx was bitterly critical of Malthus, but he generally treated Ricardo with respect as an intellectually honest defender of the interests of the bourgeoisie. For Marx's writings on Malthus, see Ronald Meek, ed., *Marx and Engels on Malthus* (New York: International Publisher, 1954). Keynes reversed this ordering and praised Malthus's underconsumptionist views while criticizing Ricardo's confidence that markets would reach equilibrium. See his essay, "Robert Malthus: The First of the Cambridge Economists," in *Essays in Biography*, by John Maynard Keynes (1933; reprint, London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1951), 81-124.
117. Gash, "Unemployment"; G. E. Fussell and M. Compton, "Agricultural Adjustments after the Napoleonic Wars," *Economic History* III, no. 14 (February 1939): 184-204; Snell, *Annals*, chap. 1.
118. J. M. Keynes, "The Economic Consequences of Mr. Churchill," in *Essays on Persuasion*, by J. M. Keynes (New York: Harcourt Brace, [1925] 1932), 244-70.
119. In an essay first published in 1923, Keynes was explicit about the parallel when speaking of his contemporaries who favored an immediate return to the prewar parity: "This view is in accordance with that expressed by Ricardo in analogous circumstances a hundred years ago." Keynes, *Essays*, 194. Polanyi also recognized the parallels between the two postwar periods in a short unpublished piece titled "1820 vs. 1920" that is in the

Karl Polanyi Archive, but he chose not to emphasize this parallel in *The Great Transformation*.

120. Deborah A. Redman, *The Rise of Political Economy as a Science: Methodology and the Classical Economists* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 276.
121. Jacob Viner, *Studies in the Theory of International Trade* (1937; reprint, New York: Augustus Kelley, 1965); Frank W. Fetter, *Development of British Monetary Orthodoxy 1791-1875* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965); Barry Gordon, *Political Economy in Parliament 1819-1823* (London: Macmillan, 1976); Boyd Hilton, *Corn, Cash, Commerce: The Economic Policies of the Tory Governments 1815-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
122. McCulloch, *Literature*, 175; Fussell and Compton, "Agricultural Adjustments."
123. Viner, *Studies*, 172.
124. Fussell and Compton, "Agricultural Adjustments," 186-89.
125. Gash, "Unemployment."
126. Hobsbawm and Rude, *Captain Swing*; Tilly, *Popular Contention*, 315-21.
127. Peter Dunkley, *The Crisis of the Old Poor Law in England: An Interpretative Essay* (New York: Garland, 1982); Peter Mandler, "The Making of the New Poor Law *Redivivus*," *Past and Present* 117 (November 1987): 131-57.
128. Hilton, *Corn, Cash*, 69-97; Gordon, *Political Economy*, 71-79.
129. Polanyi, *Transformation*, 39.
130. Poynter, *Pauperism*, 224.
131. For the consolidation of laissez-faire ideas in this period, see Peter Mandler, "Tories and Paupers: Christian Political Economy and the Making of the New Poor Law," *The Historical Journal* 33, no. 1 (1990): 81-103, and A. M. C. Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion: Christian Political Economy, 1798-1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). See also Poynter, *Pauperism* and Brundage, *Making*.
132. Poynter, *Pauperism*, chap. 6.
133. Poynter, *Pauperism*, chap. 8; Hilton, *Corn, Cash*, 98-169.
134. See Robert G. Link, *English Economic Fluctuations 1815-1848* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); Hilton, *Corn, Cash*, 77-79. Malthus supported public works projects in this period; Samuel Hollander, *The Economics of Thomas Robert Malthus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 624.
135. Poynter, *Pauperism*, chap. 9; Brundage, *Making*; Dunkley, *Crisis*.
136. The actual impact of the New Poor Law is still intensely debated. For recent discussions, see Driver, *Power and Pauperism*; King, *Poverty and Welfare*.
137. For the precariousness of Ricardian orthodoxy in this period, see S. G. Checkland, "The Propagation of Ricardian Economics in England," *Economica*, New Series, 16, no. 61 (February 1949): 40-52. On the intensity of the anti-Ricardo backlash after the 1825 crash, see Gordon, *Economic Doctrine*, chap. 4.
138. Bernard Semmel, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); C. P. Kindleberger, "The Rise of Free Trade in Western Europe, 1820-1875," *Journal of Economic History* 35, no. 1 (March 1975): 20-55.
139. Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

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