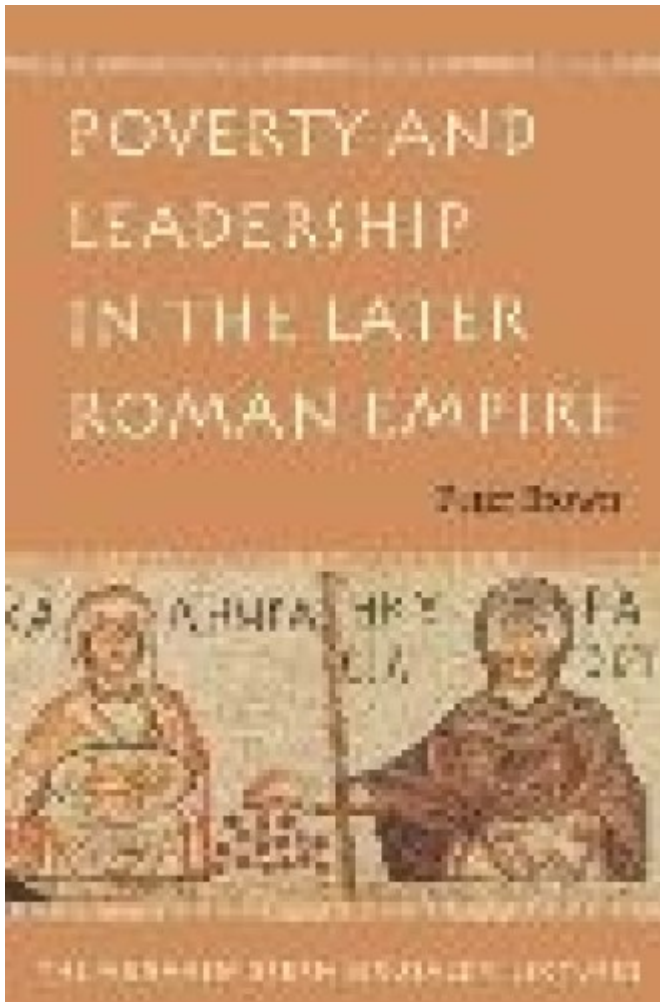


Inventing the poor

By [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [June 14, 2003](#) issue

In Review



Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire

Peter Brown

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Upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, former president Jimmy Carter remarked that the “growing gap between the rich and poor” is the most elemental problem facing

the world economy. But the gap between the rich and the poor is also a very old problem. Princeton historian Peter Brown takes up this issue of care for the poor as it was practiced in the fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era.

As usual, Brown combines erudition with an elegant style and makes his argument readily accessible. His concern with the social location of poverty is part of his larger effort to understand the character of Christianity as it negotiated its place in a still durable classical culture. The interface of classical and Christian culture has its obvious pivot point in Augustine, of whom Brown has written a classic study.

Brown begins by contrasting classical and Christian notions of care for society. In the former, *euergesia* (to do good) was a practice of the wealthy, who contributed to the well-being of society. Their giving was a much-celebrated civic virtue. But their contributions were given to an undifferentiated cultural system that made no social distinctions on the basis of need. Consequently, the poor were never visible.

Christians, on the other hand—and especially bishops—were charged to be “lovers of the poor,” a category that comprised both those poor in fact (“deep poverty”) and those who lived under the constant threat of poverty (“shallow poverty”). Such care constituted a major change in “social imagination,” Brown says. “In a sense, it was the Christian bishops who invented the poor. They rose to leadership in late Roman society by bringing the poor into ever-sharper focus.”

Brown does not oversimplify or sentimentalize the bishops’ achievement. He observes that with the conversion of Constantine, which made Christianity the official religion of the empire, bishops were invested with social significance and huge financial resources, and were obligated to give evidence of a responsible use of this entitlement. “The clergy could be called to account by the state if they failed to make use of their privileges for the benefit of the poor.” As a consequence, the bishops funded hospitals and houses of care that were concerned especially with the poor.

Brown observes that the main body of the church was made up of “middling persons” who were not wealthy but who made modest but steady contributions to the church’s support of the poor. This means of funding was quite a contrast to the classical pattern of the wealthy giving large gifts. The church also had to make an effort to support and sustain this “middling” constituency, which itself was always under the threat of falling into poverty.

The sustained effort to care for the poor that came to characterize the church is derived, Brown suggests, from “an ancient Near Eastern model of justice” mediated through the church’s liturgical use of the Old Testament. The Old Testament tradition accented the legitimate “cry” of the poor that elicited a response of “justice” from the powerful.

Brown appeals particularly to the word play of Isaiah 5:7: the monumental clarity and poetic elegance of the juxtaposition of the term *z’daqah*, “the cry,” with its remedy, *ze ‘aqah*, “justice.” This was not lost on the great Hebraist, Saint Jerome. The movement from “cry” to “justice” conveyed an ethos of justice—firm, paternal and mercifully swift—that appealed to many humble late Roman people who found themselves living in a postclassical world in which Old Testament conditions reigned.

“I would suggest that an almost subliminal reception of the Hebrew Bible, through the chanting of the Psalms and through the solemn injunctions of the bishop in connection with the *episcopalis audientia*, came to offer a meaning to the word pauper very different from the ‘pauperized’ image of the merely ‘economic’ poor. The pauper was a person with a claim upon the great. As with the poor of Israel, those who used the court of the bishop and attended his church also expected to call upon him, in time of need, for justice and protection,” Brown writes.

As the bishops developed ways to make this concern front and center in the church, a passion for the poor began to “seep out of the churches” into the horizons and practices of the empire. The language of cry-justice “added a novel tincture to the language of public relations. It became a language that was increasingly found to be apposite to describe the quality of the relation of the emperor to his subjects, and of the weak to the powerful.” Thus over time the advocacy of the church began to redefine relationships between the wealthy and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, well beyond the confines of the church.

In his final chapter Brown observes that the growing appreciation of the legitimacy of the cry of the poor created a social awareness that the powerful were obligated to provide justice and protection for the poor. Through the work of the bishops the poor were given a voice that created “an advocacy revolution” and eventually a “culture of criticism.” Brown observes that “the squeaky wheel gets the grease.” Through the church, the neediest were given permission to squeak!

This rhetorical revolution not only redefined the relationship of the rich and the poor, it also redefined the relationship of the believer to God. God could be addressed with urgent petitions as a matter of right.

Brown delighted this reviewer with his appreciation of the Psalter and would delight any right-minded Calvinist with his appreciation of Karl Barth's statement in *Church Dogmatics IV*, 2: as a poor man, writes Barth, Christ "shares as such the strange destiny which falls on God in His people and the world—to be the One who is ignored and forgotten and despised and discounted by men."

Brown finishes with a remarkable discussion of the Christology of Nestorius and Cyril of Alexandria in their effort to sort out both the distance and solidarity between the Father and Son by comparing it to the distance between God and believer and between rich and poor. The accent is upon solidarity. Brown argues that the rhetorical revolution that legitimated the cry of the needy transformed all relationships away from earlier modes in which the poor were mute and invisible.

The church still has a chance to employ such rhetoric in a technological society that wants to deny a voice to all those who live "outside the program." Brown does not make any "contemporary extrapolation" from his study, and we should not expect a disciplined historian to do so. In his final two sentences, however, he recognizes the contemporary urgency that is intrinsic to his argument: "The hope of solidarity itself, and the recognition of its attendant burdens, still weighs upon us today. It has remained a fragile aspiration, as much in need of condensation into symbolic forms of requisite density and imaginative power as it ever was in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries of the Common Era."

Of course, the interface of Christianity with classical culture is very different from the church's interface with the current U.S. economic-military hegemony and the shameless power of the market to damage human communities. Yet the parallels are suggestive enough that we might consider the accomplishment of those ancient bishops as instructive for the contemporary church.

Those who champion an undifferentiated "market society" shrilly shout "class war" if one suggests that the poor are a distinct social presence. If the poor can remain unrecognized, then no special effort on their behalf is required. I imagine that the practitioners of the old civic virtue of *euergesia* thought the same thing. But the Christian bishops, fed by the rhetoric of the Psalter, insisted upon a differentiation

that denied the illusion of social cohesion.

The contemporary church has important allies in its attentiveness to the poor—allies like Derek Bok, who in *The Trouble with Government* gives us statistics that make the plight of the poor inescapably vivid. He reminds us, for example, that “5.3 million households in 1995 consisted of ‘very low-income renters’ who received no federal housing assistance and either lived in severely substandard housing or paid half or more of their reported income for rent.” Or like Lewis H. Lapham, who in the December 2002 issue of *Harper’s* points out that the “grotesque maldistribution of the country’s wealth over the last 30 years has brought forth a class system fully outfitted with the traditional accessories of complacency, stupidity and pride.”

Most poignantly, in her report on her firsthand experience with systemic poverty, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, Barbara Ehrenreich makes us see “poverty as acute distress: The lunch that consists of Doritos or hot dog rolls, leading to faintness before the end of the shift. The ‘home’ that is also a car or a van. The illness or injury that must be ‘worked through,’ with gritted teeth, because there’s no sick pay or health insurance and the loss of one day’s pay will mean no groceries for the next.”

Ehrenreich writes that the appropriate emotional response to systemic poverty “is shame—shame at our own dependency, in this case, on the underpaid labor of others. When someone works for less pay than she can live on—when, for example, she goes hungry so that you can eat more cheaply and conveniently—then she has made a great sacrifice for you, she has made you a gift of some part of her abilities, her health and her life. The ‘working poor,’ as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society.”

In addition to paying attention to such allies, the church can also follow the lead of the ancient bishops by accomplishing a revolution in rhetoric. In a linguistically flat technological society the church can return to the “mother tongue” of scriptural poetry and prayer, through which we learn to hear the cry of the needy and to understand that they must receive justice. To do so requires liberals to quit speaking and reasoning like social scientists. It requires conservatives to quit appealing to philosophic certitudes. It invites conservatives and liberals together to reembrace the dangerous rhetoric of covenantal interaction.

For all of the new imperial social entitlements they received, the ancient bishops—even with mixed motives—insisted on being who they were: teachers of

the gospel. They could not and did not evade the imaginative alternative of gospel truth. And they demonstrated how the primal language of the church could perform as a public language.