

Juan Luis Vives on poor relief

In this essay I will pay attention to the ideas on poor relief in *De Subventione Pauperum* (1526), written by the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives. I will try to put it in the context of late medieval ideology on poverty and poor relief. I will not draw a conclusive picture in this essay, but I'll put forward three keyfigures from the late medieval period who wrote about poverty and poor relief and are representative for some development within this time-frame: Thomas Aquinas representing scholastic philosophy, Geert Groote, the main founder of the *Devotio Moderna* movement and finally, the humanist Thomas More, writer of *Utopia*.



The modernistic approach that Vives laid down in *De Subventione Pauperum* strikes most readers nowadays and some scholars went a step further by announcing that this piece of work laid the ideological foundation of modern welfare. In the historiography of poor relief, *book II* of *De Subventione Pauperum* was mostly emphasized, because it contains a practical guide for the re-organization of poor relief.

This historiography was mostly worked out in the sixties, seventies and eighties of the twentieth century and the vision about poor relief in those days was quite pessimistic.

Whether it was because the historiography was dominated by Marxist approaches containing fundamental suspicion of religious institutions or it was because the success of the welfare state after WWII gave historians more ammunition for a moralistic opinion about poor relief in the past. Fact is that poor relief by these historians was mainly described as a transaction of the wealthy gaining salvation from God by giving alms to the poor.

In these studies there is a lacking of other types of poor relief besides the religious practice of almsgiving. In this narrative of late medieval poor relief, Vives functioned as a symbol of radical change from the religious practice of almsgiving to the modern approach of state-centralized care-taking. From the nineties on this picture is slowly changing. Lyllewyn Bogaers shows in her study of late-

medieval Utrecht that salvation is not the only motive for helping neighbours in need, but that the community plays an important role. She accuses the historians on the subject that their vision is not always the product of systematic analysis, but also of reproducing existing visions.

De Subventionem Pauperum adds new features to the ideology of poor relief, but is probably more an articulation of ideas about the issue that were already changing, than the radical change mentioned above. Medieval ideas of taking care of the poor are probably not that egoistic motivated, while the poor relief of the sixteenth century state was not that much better for the poor.

Historic background poor relief

Poor relief wasn't organized in a centralized manner in the late Middle ages. The poor were getting help from a broad scope of institutions providing food, shelter and healthcare. Hospitals were often run by nuns or brothers. Sick people could recover or were taken care of on their deathbed. People paid a small sum and the poor would get help for free. Guesthouses or godhouses were mostly run by brotherhoods or guilds. They were specialized in giving shelter to poor travellers, but they also provided healthcare. However, the difference between guesthouses and hospitals was not as strict as I pictured, especially when time passed by. For food, poor people could turn to the poor tables (in dutch called 'armendis' or 'tafel van den Heiligen Geest'). These were organized within a parochial church, not by the clergy, but by laypeople. The poor tables provided food, mostly bread, fish and meat, and sometimes wine or beer. These poor were not the beggars or vagabonds, but the so-called house-poor (called 'huisarmen' in dutch).

During the 15th century these institutions came under pressure because cities got more and more poor people due to socio-economic crises. Hospitals and guesthouses also saw their capacity taken in by fortunate people who paid an amount of money to reserve a place in the house to spend their last days. At first a nice way for the guesthouse to earn some extra money, but in the end this practice took up too much space of the real sick and poor. Poor tables also could get into trouble. They earned money through rich people, who gave money when they died with the condition that the table organized a mass for their soul every year. Sometimes the anniversary masses would take in too much of the budget which was meant to be given on food for the poor.

To cope with the incapacity of the existing institutions due to the growing numbers of poor people, (city)governments started to interfere in a domain, that was traditionally a matter of the church or private initiative. Besides the practical urgency to change the policy, historians point also to the changing attitude against poverty. Up to the sixteenth century, being poor was send by God and you have to bear it with dignity. More and more people started to see beggars as undermining the health and good manners of the city-population. Michielse sums up this changing attitude as desacralizing poverty and concludes that gaining salvation is no longer the prominent motive for poor relief. He recognizes three groups of people focusing on poverty in this new manner, namely the city-governors, the capitalists and the humanists. City-governors are mostly concerned by public safety, capitalists saw many non-working beggars while they urgently needed working man

and the humanists saw in the growing poor a project for their educational ambitions.



During this period of change within poor relief, in 1526, Vives wrote his treatise *De Subventionem Pauperum*. At the time he lived in Bruges and saw the problems with the poor that many city's coped with and wrote his book about his ideological, but also his practical ideas on poverty and poor relief. In 1525 Ypres started their reformation program of poor relief and it's now recognized as the first city council to start a program like that in the low countries. It is often suggested that Ypres might have borrowed their ideas from Vives, but we now know they already started their reformation before Vives published. However, they must have thought Vives articulated these ideas very well, because when their program came under critique of the church in 1530, they did not only wrote their own justification, but also gave order to translate Vives' work to go with this justification. *Secours van den aermen* was published in 1533 as the first translation, but more translations, in German, Italian and French would soon follow. Whether Vives is really the father of the new poverty politics or not, the spreading of his treatise made him at least the spokesman of this new political approach. In 1531 Charles V send out an edict to get city councils in the Netherlands to introduce a similar scheme. Many city councils in the low countries developed institutions for the 'common poor'. (In dutch called 'gemeene aermen'.)

De Subventionem Pauperum

De Subventionem Pauperum is divided in two books. The first book is mainly dealing with the theoretical framework behind poor relief, while the second book is offering a practical guide for city governments. In a small introduction directed to Lodewijk van Praet, burgomaster of Bruges, Vives tells what motivates him to write his treatise. He talked with Van Praet some years earlier about the subject, who asked him to formulate his ideas. Besides that, Vives is moved by the poverty in Bruges, the city he considers as much as his own as his native town Valencia. He tells that city governors should not allow poor people in the city as a father wouldn't allow hunger in his household.

De Subventionem Pauperum: Book I

In the first book of *De Subventionem Pauperum* Vives explores the ideological fundamentals behind poverty and poor relief. He starts with the tale of Adam and Eve being sent out of the garden of Eden. After the fall of man, pride, envy and hatred took over the healthy and strong body God gave him in the first place. In the Garden of Eden people were under the wholesome nourishment of God, by leaving the place the struggle to survive and therefore the suffering began.

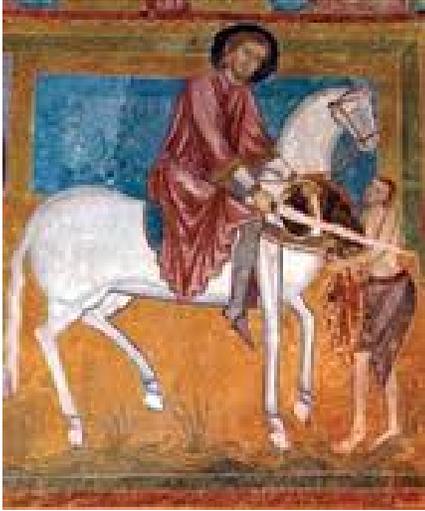
Vives considers, helping your fellowman in need, as natural. People are part of a community and depend on each other. God wants people to be living in community, because then people will help each other out of fear for being needy themselves some day. Although this mutual dependency urges people to help fellows in need, there are discouragements. Vives saw two reasons why people restrain from doing good. Firstly someone who wants to give, is afraid that his good deed won't benefit the receiver, and is therefore wasted. The other reason is fear of ungratefulness. He also noticed there are beggars who are in fact able to work, and so they should.

Although Vives points out the obligation for the community to take care of the needy, he advises the poor to bear their poverty with dignity. It is sent by God and according to Vives the poor fits in a secret and just design. He furthermore stretched out that the poor may not have material goods to offer their children, they should at least offer them pious and religious education.

So Vives recognized reasons to be fearful of doing good. Still he finds no reason why people shouldn't. Some rich people, he claims, will not help poor people at all because one of them was once ungrateful. He quotes Luke 3:11 : "He who has two tunics, let him give one to him who has none, and he who has food, let him do likewise", while pointing out the inequality of some wearing silk, while others are stiff from cold. His conclusion is straight to the point. He states that 'anyone who does not share with the poor whatever is left over from his natural needs is a thief.'

De Subventionem Pauperum: Book II

Book II starts with Vives' statement that the first book was mea



nt for the individual citizen, while the second book is meant for the rulers of a city. It is because book II is especially meant as a manual for poverty politics of the city that historians mostly paid attention to the second book.

Vives starts his argument by stating that city politics should do something for their poor citizens. To point out how poor people are also part of the community, he compares the city with a human body, where the hands and feet are also far from the heart, but essential for the functioning body. A city that doesn't take care of the poor is like a doctor who doesn't pay attention to the hands and feet. Also he notices that poor people, are driven to thievery out of need. They envy the rich who spend their money on luxury while they can't feed their children. Also they lower their standard of living, they bring diseases into the city, beg in front of the church instead of learning the teachings of Christ and their hatred towards the rich is often at the roots of civil wars. City magistrates should consider that helping the poor is also in their own interest.

The program Vives describes can be summarized in four steps. Register the poor, find jobs for the healthy beggars, put the funds of all institutions together and take care of the remaining poor.

First, all people in the hospitals and poor people are investigated and registered. The reasons why they need support has to be clear and beggars in good health should explain why they don't work. Healthy beggars from another city will get money and food for the journey and send back to their hometown. The native-born healthy beggars should be put to work. If needed, they should get education to do work they aren't used to. In the wool industry is great shortage of manpower and there is always work in the field of public works. To finance it all Vives thinks that the budgets of all institutions should be calculated as one budget. Also people should be obligated to leave part of their testamentary remains to the poor and in churches there should be boxes where everyone can leave something for the poor voluntarily. According to Vives this should be more than enough for all institutions. Vives concludes by answering the critics that a city without beggars would be possible. He considers it an honor of the city when they succeed to create a place without beggars. He believes it would result in a place with fewer thieveries, robberies and murders. Also there would

me more harmony among the citizens as the poor wouldn't envy the rich anymore and the rich wouldn't suspect the poor and so they treat each other with more dignity.

De Subventione Pauperum: detailed manual or theoretical survey

Although book II of *De Subventione Pauperum* is more a practical outline of city politics. It still doesn't go into the day to day practice of institutions working on poor relief and it still puts forward a strong ideological vision on poverty. It is good to note that while Vives is often seen as the starting point of the political change, he doesn't get into detailed criticism on the existing institutions. Details about the poor relief in Bruges or a good picture how poor relief worked in those days is lacking in the treatise. Also, he focuses mainly on the problem of inefficiency of too many institutions, while the problems of rich people buying themselves into hospitals or the absorbed budgets of poor tables by anniversary masses, aren't mentioned at all. These points must lead to the conclusion that Vives' knowledge of the institutions for poor relief wasn't too good.

Maybe it is better, due to the lack of practical detailed knowledge, to consider Book II also as a theoretical survey, instead of calling it the practical guide, like many historians did. As a theoretical outline it will fit on every possible city, and the intentions formulated by Vives are without doubt modern, maybe even to this date. This might be Vives' ambition to begin with.

Opinions on poor relief before Vives

The most prominent issues Vives puts forward in *De Subventione Pauperum*, that should be compared with other thinkers, are his ideas about poverty versus property, the obligation of the community to help and the idea to centralize poor relief.

Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas was an Italian philosopher and theologian from the 13th century who was part of the scholastic tradition. No other philosopher has dominated the way of thinking in the late medieval period as Aquinas. He started his main work *Summa Theologiae* around 1265 and finished it a few years before his death in 1274. In scholastic fashion he puts forward a set of propositions, followed by possible objections and concluded with his answers to these objections.

First I will pay attention to the ideas about property and theft by Aquinas. In the *Summa* he answers the question whether it is natural for man to possess external things. On one side man has no power over external things, because all things obey only to God. On the other hand the dominion over things are natural for man because of their use of reason and will. God directed his sovereign dominion partly to man. While answering the question about private property Aquinas tells that man should possess external things, not on his own, but in community, so he is able to communicate to others in need.

Although Aquinas seems to consider property as something of the community, he defends private property by stating that theft is not only a sin, but a mortal sin. He condemns theft this strong because he considers theft as the opposite of charity. By theft you don't love but harm your neighbour. However when being need it is lawful to steal, because Aquinas points out that in cases of need all things are becoming common property.

Aquinas states that the love of a neighbour also means loving yourself, because loving your neighbour as yourself could be turned backwards too. Andreas Keck calls selflove the overall principal of love by Thomas Aquinas. And therefore the almsgiving is mainly giving tribute to oneself. Keck concludes that in the late Middle Ages charity and also living in voluntarily poverty, as a model to conquer the self, became the Christian ideal way to live. Aquinas considers almsgiving a prescript. Loving our neighbour is mandatory and therefore any necessary condition in life for the neighbour is mandatory too.

The most prominent question to be answered, after noticing that Christians have a duty to give alms, is who gives alms and who they should give alms to. As selflove is the startingpoint of love, one should only give alms out of things he doesn't really need. Aquinas even calls it a sin to deprive yourself from your needs. At the other hand, giving alms is only prescript when the other person is in need. In other words: alms are to be given by persons who possess more than they need, and they should give it to those who don't possess the goods they really need. Although the concept of almsgiving for Aquinas is primarily a matter of charity in the Christian sense, as an act before the eyes of God, it is still important to note that practically speaking the surplus of the rich should fill up the lacking of the poor. However, almsgiving is always a transaction and creates a relationship between the giver and the receiver.

Geert Grote

Geert Groote from Deventer lived and worked in the 14th century. He is the main founder of the [Devotio Moderna](#), a religious movement in the late Middle Ages that spread in a short time through the low countries and beyond. They founded small communities of brothers or sisters working and living together as monks. Geert Groote and followers like Thomas Kempis didn't write many theological or philosophical works, but instead instructional books for the brothers and sisters about how they should live. Their ideas about poverty must be seen mostly in the way they acted. In their communities they lived with common goods, they lived in poverty and taking care for the sick and the poor was considered important. However, there is one work of Geert Groote which tells more about his ideas about poverty and poor relief.

In 1372 he wrote *Contra turrim traiectensem*, a protest against the building of the Dom-tower of Utrecht, but in this work he also mentions indirectly poverty and poor relief. It is unlikely Vives read this treatise. There is only one manuscript found and it couldn't be widespread, it is even questioned if the treatise was published at all. But Vives must have been aware of the movement of Geert Groote and the practical way of dealing with property and works for the poor and the sick.

And also because the movement influenced humanism, mainly through Rudolph Agricola, an early humanist who studied with Thomas Kempis.

The *Contra turrim traiectensem* wasn't a treatise about poor relief to begin with. In this treatise Geert Groote, who was active as canon in the Dom church at the time, criticizes the building of the churchtower. The ambition in Utrecht to build the highest tower in the low countries was compared by Groote to the builders of the tower of Babel. The only purpose for a churchtower is to carry clocks. When the building would be higher than necessary for the clocks, it would only be there to be idle, to brag or out of pride. Groote states that the richness of the church is based on the fact that they get more goods than they actually need. They should use what they need, but the rest of it is meant for the poor. Besides that, the clergy should live in imitation of Christ in poverty and should show more mercy to the needy than lay-people would do. Groote reasons that while the clergy is obligated to use the surplus of their property to help the needy, and the Dom-tower of Utrecht would be much higher than necessary, they use the goods that are meant for the poor. Therefore they are stealing from the poor. After that he gets personal at bishop Jan van Arkel by declaring that he is not chosen for this position to mock the poor.

Thomas More

The English humanist Thomas More was lawyer and politician and served at the court of Henry VIII. He made several trips to Flanders and was befriended with Erasmus and from 1520 on also with Vives. Thomas More didn't directly write about poverty or poor relief. However, it is one of the topics in More's novel *Utopia*. In this story about a fictional island, Thomas More philosophizes about some new political ideas. The story is best to be read as a framework for More's criticism on the political reality of his time. Still, the political novelties on the island of Utopia can also be seen as idealized ambitions that could be appearing in a society to come. Ideas of religious freedom and socio-economical equality have inspired political thinkers for centuries and are still not out of date.

For this essay the socio-economic ideas are relevant. More wrote his book in 1516, four years before he met Vives and ten years before Vives wrote his treatise on poor relief. Although *Utopia* is a piece of fiction and also an unrealistic description of a perfect society, it might have influenced Vives when he wrote *De Subventionem Pauperum*.

In *Utopia* everybody works only six hours a day, the free time is spented as everyone like. They might follow extra education, make music or just socialize. As everybody works, also the women, it is enough to produce goods to provide everybody's needs. There are no excuses for not working if you can. So there are no beggars, who could work anyway. All produced goods are distributed to warehouses and from there to shops in every area of town. If the head of the household needs some goods, he will go to a shop and ask for the things he need. He doesn't have to pay, because there is enough for everybody. Most people are dining and lunching in the big dining halls, which of course are free. The socio-economical ambition that More shows through *Utopia* is described as follows: "Under such a system, there's bound to be plenty of everything, and, as everything is

divided equally among the entire population, there obviously can't be poor people or beggars."

Conclusion

As we already saw, the ideological concept on poor relief of Vives starts with the notion that it is natural for humans to live in community and therefore to help fellows in need. When Thomas Aquinas talks about the community he points at the condition that the poor should be in, during extreme need. Although the community is important in late Medieval thinking, Vives seems to put more weight on community than Aquinas does. He repeats the Medieval idea that the poor should carry their fate with dignity, still he doesn't accept poverty at all. After getting rid of fake beggars, everything must be done to get rid of poverty. Aquinas is clear that when there is extreme poverty, people with more possessions than they need, are obligated to give alms. But because selflove should be the most important drive behind almsgiving, he puts the giver in the forefront. Vives based his treatise from the beginning on the needs of the receiver. This doesn't mean that there is a clean break between the ideas of Aquinas and Vives. Geert Groote's critique on the church for spending money on idle projects instead of taking care of the poor, is clearly on the side of the poor. So Vives has a different approach on poverty than Aquinas, but Geert Groote did so too, more than a century before him.

Aquinas doesn't seem to share Vives' ambition to get rid of all poverty. Thomas More however does articulate this ambition in *Utopia*. Sharing all working hours and all goods equally would mean the end of beggars and real poverty. Although he made his claims in a piece of fiction, Vives must have read it and was dead serious when he repeated this strong ambition. He didn't only consider it possible to create a city without beggars, he also believed it would result in a city with less thieves, robbers and murderers.

To conclude, most elements Vives used in his treatise aren't brand new. The concept of poor relief that would only be there for the benefit of the almsgiver, was already changing in the late medieval period. Ambitions to create poor relief politics that could wipe out poverty were probably a new 16th century feature, but Thomas More wrote about ambitions like that before Vives. We already saw he also wasn't the first with his practical program on poor relief. The town of Ypres already created such a program. What makes *De Subventionem Pauperum* unique was the combination of this conclusive practical approach, an ideological background with an honest concern for the poor.