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The Poor of the *Ancien Régime*

by Jean-François Laé

Under the *Ancien Régime*, salaries were not enough to live on. Many people had to combine activities to make ends meet. Laurence Fontaine paints a vivid picture of this reality.

About: Laurence Fontaine, *Vivre pauvre. Quelques enseignements tirés de l'Europe des Lumières*, Paris, Gallimard, 2022, 512 p., 24 €.

Laurence Fontaine's latest book, *Vivre pauvre. Quelques enseignements tirés de l'Europe des Lumières* (Living poor: Lessons from the European Enlightenment), is an extraordinary plunge into the world of poverty in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. In the space of 495 pages, we are presented with street scenes, skirmishes, life-or-death credit negotiations, exchanges, solidarities—all of which form a sort of ethnographic study of how the working classes managed to survive in the four corners of Europe. How was credit transferred in the most banal relationships, giving rise to the pettiest of moral affairs? How did the circulation of goods, people, work, reputations, assistance, and hunger-free positions take place concretely? What were the consequences of illness or death for women, but also for children momentarily transformed into bargaining chips? These are some of the questions Fontaine has been tackling for the past forty years. Thanks to her, we now know that salaries in the *Ancien Régime* were not enough to live on, and that behind the day-to-day accounts this unequal regime was a terrible factory of beggars from which no family could escape. We also know that debts were neither an invariant nor the monopoly of usurers, as they circulated in chain fashion through all levels of working-class sociability and attachment, regardless of location, age, or gender.

Behind the Scenes of Grand History

How did the author manage to see the grain of budgets so finely? By tracing a pragmatic history while remaining sensitive to the details of the narratives.

Accustomed to cross-referencing sources—whether account books, letters written by ordinary merchants, notary archives, peddlers' files, or *maréchaussée* records—Fontaine firmly holds the thread of credit, the main recourse of the poor, throughout the centuries covered. She also listens closely to the small local elites, who in 1777 searched for ways to alleviate poverty through a contest organized by the *Académie des sciences, arts et belles-lettres* of Châlons-sur-Marne. This was the contest of the century! It garnered 125 responses, thousands of pages written by provincial elites, regional intendants, hospice directors, and military officers, all of whom shared their observations and ideas on how to fix the flow of laborers-workers-beggars-thieves a little better. Participants in the 1777 contest were asked to offer a reflection "on how to eradicate begging by making beggars useful to the state without making them unhappy." Everyone came up with new measures. Some advocated letting victims beg, while others pleaded for better-organized collections. The idea of insurance emerged—through calamities such as hail or fire—but failed to materialize.

The contest, however, is not the point. It is an opportunity for the author to read, underneath the thousands of pages, the descriptions of budgets she carefully seeks out. Hence the plethora of stories about "saving one's life," the innumerable short biographies taken from hospitals and charities, and the more commonplace observations of philanthropists and courthouses. Fontaine cross-references these with other sources, taking us on incredible tours from Genoa to Venice, Bologna, or Florence; from Amsterdam to Bruges, Antwerp, Brussels, or The Hague; from Madrid to St. Petersburg; from Rennes to Guincamp, Elbeuf, or Le Havre; and from Lyon to Paris.

Despite the immense scope of the investigation, the scale is the individual.

Despite the vast geography covered, the combination of activities is backed by case studies.

Despite the scattering of accounts, debts are reconstituted.

Fontaine's approach consists of adding up the "figures" of debts, accounts, family ties, legal or illegal activities, seasonal occupations, with the aim of

demonstrating that poverty was not a fixed condition, a definitive position, or an exclusion as we would say in modern language. Everything was in such a state of flux that the concept of "class"—which presupposes choosing, ordering, and hierarchizing, in short, codifying—does not hold up to analysis.

The thesis proposes a history of what lay "below" the supposed structuring of markets—not on the margins of corporations, but on a continuum between mobility, work, begging, vagrancy, drudgery, momentary child abandonment, and occasional lodging. As Fontaine makes clear, all these moments went hand in hand. The various social practices one can see in these thousands of stories formed a picture of mobility, wherein the high cost of foodstuffs intermingled with work opportunities, but also with vulnerabilities that varied depending on one's position in the life cycle, gender, life trajectory (early or late marriage of parents, accidents, illnesses), and sector of activity.

A Combination of Activities

Everywhere in Europe, the combination of activities was the primary strategy. People found occasional work in portering and services, home-based crafts, the resale of small goods. On bridges and squares, self-made products were sold next to illegal ones. Then came the surplus from flower and kitchen gardens. Mornings were spent in the workshop, evenings in the kitchen garden well into the night. Some people recycled leftovers and scraps—sometimes of luxury materials. Sailors, family servants, peddlers, and customs employees salvaged goods and resold them through their wives. The women also sold dishes, cakes, soups, and drinks, in addition to making children's clothes. Meanwhile, one came across grocers, tavern keepers, fruit and vegetable vendors, but also sellers of lemons, chicken, pasta, bread, and chestnuts. Small craftsmen made keys and hats, mended stockings, and sharpened knives. One last market testifies to a continuous migration: the one-night bed. The poor rented beds to other poor people, or to people even poorer than themselves. The practice was widespread. This was certainly the case in Paris, where half of the women registered as landladies in 1767 were widows.

Paying With One's Body

Let us now unpack a specific figure.

Let us seize the last link of this multifaceted economy: the placement of children.

On May 21, 1740, a one-and-a-half-month-old girl was brought to the Hôtel-Dieu Hospital after being abandoned in a confessional of the hospital church. She wore a lead medallion indicating that she was born and baptized in the hospital. Two letters addressed to the child's mother by her male companion were found in the swaddling clothes. In the first letter, dated Orléans, October 6, 1739, the companion asked the mother to come and join him. The second letter, dated March 29, 1740, came from Nantes; the man claimed this was his sixth letter to her. The child's mother gave birth a few days after receiving the second letter, and then left the hospital. Seven years later, she returned to the Hôtel-Dieu to reclaim her daughter. Likewise, a tailor from La Guillotière, who "not knowing where to turn" had enlisted in the "light troops of the Navy" and abandoned a little girl in 1750, tried to locate his child four years later, once he had settled as a merchant-master tailor in New Orleans and saved up 30,000 livres.

According to Fontaine, the placement of children was a response to economic downturns. After the crisis had passed—thanks to a grape harvest or a profitable new business—parents were able to settle in a home and "take back" their children. Thus, eleven of the forty-three little boys "abandoned" in 1767 were reclaimed in the years that followed, as were eight of the thirty-one little girls. The letters conveniently left in the children's swaddling clothes served both as justification and as signs of a temporary in-between.

Let us continue our examination of childhood with another striking text. The children were older this time, and so the orphanage was no longer needed. Working women were largely unable to support their offspring, but they could place a son or daughter with one of their neighbors. They also relied on neighborhood ties for various forms of assistance, a place to sleep, food in exchange for a helping hand, and perhaps even a little charity.

Let us now join a patrol of the *maréchaussée*. The patrol is taking place in Lyon, on the night of June 5-6, 1770. Five very young boys have just been arrested. Twelve-

year-old François, son of a journeyman saddler, is a rope puller. He begs because he lost his job a year ago, and because his father is unable to feed him. Antoine is eleven years old and blind. His father is a penniless chair bearer, and his aunt "mends stockings" for next to nothing. And so, from time to time, he lends a hand to the baker who houses him "in a stable," in addition to doing favors for a pawnbroker. Ten-year-old Raymond was sent to the Bicêtre hospice at his father's death, as his mother had to sell her furniture to pay the rent and retire to Savoie. However, a journeyman dyer has taken him in. Ten-year-old Nicolas, for his part, has been begging for four months because his mother, a washerwoman, put him up to it. Finally, nine-year-old Jean, long orphaned by his mother, has been staying with a miller for the past three months, ever since his father, a former tailor, passed away at the Hôtel-Dieu.

Because all the mentioned characters were poor to varying degrees (even though half of them worked), all practices were interconnected, and interdependencies were constantly being monetized. This high degree of fluctuation makes it impossible to definitively assign individuals to a category, rank, group, or class. In short, speaking of "the poor" no longer makes sense, as each individual went from day worker to evening beggar, from material recovery to theft, from a brief work migration in the summer to a family migration to the fishing grounds of Brittany.

Ultimately, it was circulation that opened up opportunities. Circulation was essential if you wanted to survive, find "luck," perhaps even set up in business! It was the comings and goings that enabled transactions, the circuit that created channels for the sale of small goods. Yet, at the end of the chain, women and children had to pay a high price for the up-and-down rotations. Witness the prostitution to which they occasionally turned as a last resort.

Of Ethnography in History

In conclusion, Fontaine's entire intellectual project lies in the cross-referencing of sources—a veritable crossroads where testimonies, accounts of events, and short biographical narratives jostle with each other, together revealing the immense fluctuation of situations and practical arrangements in which one could simultaneously be a salaried employee, a shopkeeper, a small-time vendor, a day laborer, a thief, a port worker, a beggar, a farm wife, a washerwoman, a woman living in a couple or a wrongly married one. This continuum entails the displacement of our

segmented gaze. As Fontaine observes, our contemporary power of nomination misses the complex figures of empirical arrangements: the triple activities with one foot in the law and the other outside it, one hand working in the morning and the other picking pockets at night—all porous figures carried by continuous flows. The immense gap between the discourse on poverty and practical figures is not new. Yet, Fontaine's "European case studies" (see chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6) allow her to revisit problems and issues we thought had been buried. And they make it possible for us to measure the distance between our contemporary habits of mind and what used to be, so long as we accept to concretely consider human capacities and the secondary strategies developed by people of little means, by "people of nothing."

The fruit of an intense, brilliant, and violent immersion in the past, the story of revolving debt imposes itself as a history in its own right, but also as a sociology concerned with subtly deciphering the underground of lodging, eating, drinking, sleeping, and hand-to-hand dealings that question our present. There is no end to the exploration of the subtle continuities of dependence, the rough and tumble of illegal economies, the intimated or forced arrangements that radically elude us. This economy of debt created yet another space for our intelligence. All in all, Fontaine provides a very precise answer to the question Georg Simmel posed in Volume I of *L'Année sociologique*: "How are social forms maintained?" The question has not changed in a hundred years. Yet, this time the historian uncovers the primary gestures, not by honing in on the figure of the individual, but by inserting herself in the in-between, in the heart of the action. In other words, by attending to the very concrete, traceable material exchanges that followed the circulations in space, through the various forms of debt that caught men and women "by the horns"—an insurance of survival before life insurance.

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