

Poor Relief, Medical Care, and Voluntarism
in Eighteenth-Century Hamburg¹

Mary Lindemann

Department of History, University of Miami

[Do not cite, quote, duplicate, or circulate without the written consent of the author.]

When Hamburg entered the eighteenth century, it boasted a range of charitable institutions dedicated to satisfying a wide variety of social welfare needs. The five metropolitan parishes distributed money, bread, and clothing to the poor. The *Zucht-, Werk- und Armenhaus* sheltered the destitute of all ages and both sexes in attention to functioning as a house of correction for pernicious beggars, dissolute women, and petty offenders. A large *Pesthof*, and a smaller *Gasthaus*, combined hospital-like functions with hospices for the elderly. An orphanage (*Waisenhaus*), theoretically only for the children of citizens, nonetheless also took in foundlings. “Ragged schools” drummed religion and learning into the heads of pauper children. Private legacies, testaments, and family charities existed in great profusion and catered to several populations: women needing dowries, down-on-their-luck artisans, impecunious but worthy

¹Some material for this paper has been taken from my *Patriots and Paupers: Hamburg, 1712-1830* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

scholars, and so on. Finally, the range of casual charity – alms given on the streets, a loaf of bread or a bowl of soup handed out from the kitchen, or cast-off clothing passed on – was probably enormous but its dimensions remain difficult to document. None of this differentiated Hamburg from many other early modern cities.

This plethora of public service organizations, however, rarely dealt well with emergencies. The plague epidemic of 1711-14 had revealed what many observers considered woeful inadequacies in how the city handled the dual blows of disease and poverty and subsequently stimulated a vigorous debate about poor relief and medical care that continued over the rest of the century and into the next. Most criticism of the existing “system” of poor relief in Hamburg decried its decentralization and its inefficiency, and pinpointed its inability to deal with the problems of a poverty increasingly perceived in structural terms, that is, as more the result of economic shifts than of moral flaws. In addition, awareness was growing that issues of poverty in a city the size Hamburg reached during the eighteenth century were not only quantitatively different from those of smaller communities, they were *qualitatively* different as well.

Of course, one should not accept criticisms eighteenth-century reformers raised as transparent reflections of reality. The hodge-podge of public services that Hamburg possessed, despite its perceived lack of centralization and poor coordination, performed quite adequately *except* in times of great crisis. And, quite frankly, the programs introduced later in the eighteenth century also proved unable to cope much better in critical situations. My interest here is neither in the poor themselves, nor in the ways in which the eighteenth century redefined poverty, but rather in the *administration* and the *administrators* of poor relief and medical care, and their relationship to broader political life in Hamburg. One constant, true since the late middle ages

and also well into the nineteenth century, was that poor relief remained tightly linked into governing institutions and governing styles in Hamburg. Hamburg's political organizations and its political culture changed little from 1712 to at least 1815. Indeed, a strong case can be made for their persistence until as late as 1860, despite enormous shifts in social and economic conditions. Not the least of these latter was a growth in population. Equally obvious were important alterations in the structure of the economy and the laboring groups that served it, as commerce and international trade came to dominate the city's economy more fully than ever before. While change also occurred in poor relief and medical care over the course of the eighteenth century, it was mostly a matter of decanting old wine into new bottles. Despite the apparent innovativeness of reforms introduced especially in late century, guiding principles modified little.

“Voluntarism” was the most cherished governmental principle in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Hamburg. Policy-making decisions devolved on men who held what were designated as voluntary or honorary (*ehrenamtlich*) offices. Voluntary did not equate cleanly with “volunteer,” however. Nor should eighteenth-century voluntarism be understood as the term is used today in politics and economics to emphasize “voluntary cooperation” as separate and fully distinct from the actions and organizations of state. The Principal Recess of 1712 stipulated that anyone selected for the office of subdeacon, deacon, Alderman, *Ratsherr*, *Bürgermeister*, or any other *Ehrenamt* could not escape the “honor.” Refusal to accept the office could result in loss of citizenship and even banishment. Only age and illness freed a designee. Dispensations were rare as were requests for them, and probably the difficulty with which one could be attained

accounted for the paucity of attempts.²

The city carefully monitored non-honorary offices. In 1684, in a belt-tightening measure, the government decided to sell outright or lease certain lower government posts. Art. IX of the Principal Recess had divided municipal posts into three categories: (1) those filled by (s)election and to which attached no payment (the many *Ehrenämter*); (2) positions open only to candidates judged capable by the *Senat* (Hamburg's highest governing body) of filling a particular office and who were required to post bond with the treasury; and (3) those jobs sold or leased to the highest bidder and which required payment of a fee and a surety. Apparently, the lease or sale of office never functioned entirely satisfactorily and, after 1814, fees and deposits for the third category were abolished and these officials now received fixed salaries, creating something like a paid civil service for the first time. While the number of these paid positions was not insignificant, their holders never engaged in policy making nor were they ever equated with the more prestigious range of *ehrenämtliche* offices.³

Of the *Ehrenämter*, only the most demanding were benefitted with honoraria (*not* salaries). Members of the *Senat* – which included the *Bürgermeister*, *Ratsherren*, *Syndici*, and

²See “Varia, verschiedene gewährte und abgeschlagene Gesuche um Dispensation von bürgerlichen (und kirchlich-bürgerlichen) Offizien betreffend, 1727-1807,” StAHbg, Senat Cl. VII Lit. Bc no. 13 fasc. 1 and the short list of resignations from the *Senat* in StAHbg, Senat Cl. VII Lit. Ab no. 3 vol. 5.

³Buek, *Die Hamburgische Oberalten: Ihre bürgerliche Wirksamkeit und ihre Familien* (Hamburg: Perthes, Besser & Mauke, 1857), 406-08; Friedrich Voigt, *Beiträge zur hamburgischen Verwaltungsgeschichte*, vol. 2: *Der Verkauf, später das Verpachten städtischer Diensstellen in Hamburg, 1684-1810* (Hamburg: Gräfe & Sillem, 1918); Nikolaus Westphalen, *Hamburgs Verfassung und Verwaltung in ihrer allmählichen Entwicklung bis auf die neueste Zeit* (2nd. enlarged, rev. ed.; Hamburg: Perthes, Besser & Mauke, 1846), 1: 27-32; a list of purchasable offices is found in Jonas Ludwig von Heß, *Hamburg, topographisch, politisch und historisch beschrieben* (2nd ed.; Hamburg: Hoffmann, 1811), 3: 431-32.

Secretarii – all received what were designated *douceurs* (not bribes or tips in today’s understanding, of course). In 1695, for instance, a “Rath und Bürgerschuß” provided for the “Salarirung” of the Aldermen, but the Principal Recess of 1712 (which ended decades of civil strife in the city and formed the constitutional basis of the Hamburg until 1860) canceled the honorarium, although it was then quickly restored in 1712 when each Alderman received a “do[u]ceur” of 1000 Mk. Banco plus tax exemptions.⁴ Hamburg staffed almost the entire middling range of government offices – from the parish to the treasury to the courts – with unpaid nonprofessionals (although the possession of a legal degree had become the *sine qua non* for some positions). Generally, it was believed that those who worked for money were not only more corruptible but also were less able to make impartial and balanced decisions that served the good of the community as a whole. Rather, “pious, Christian, honorable, true, upright . . . indefatigable” and, perhaps above all, prosperous men, who served out of a commitment to God and community best knew how to preserve civic peace and promote communal welfare.

Equally significant was the other side of the coin. The necessity of paying people to run government proved that civic spirit was waning. Only citizens arranging their own affairs out of a sense of duty safeguarded and preserved the “republic.” Yet, increasingly, over the course of the eighteenth century, developments in Hamburg’s social, economic, and demographic patterns came to place tremendous strains on the venerable structures of voluntarism, not least of all in the sphere of public services. How Hamburg’s elites coped with these problems, how they

⁴“Rath- und Bürgerschuß,” 7 February 1695; Art. XIX of Principal Recess (*Haupt-Receß*) of 1712; “Rath- und Bürgerschuß,” 22 September 1712. In 1767 the honorarium for the Aldermen was increased to 1250 Mk. Bco. and, in 1806, to 2000 Mk. Bco. Westphalen, *Hamburgs Verfassung und Verwaltung*, 1: 219.

sought to preserve voluntarism in government while also ratcheting up efficiency in the realm of social welfare is the subject of this paper. It focuses on a series of poor relief reforms and on new innovations in medical care after 1760. Important here is the definition of what role a “citizen” played in these contexts.

Jonas Ludwig von Hess, writing at the end of the century, described – and idealized – the ways in which Hamburg balanced administrative needs with sacred tenets of voluntarism. “The state of Hamburg,” Hess pointed out, “requires a large number of officials . . . to fulfill its wants, provide its comforts, see to its defense and for the demonstration of its majesty, grandeur, and prosperity. . . . It needs too many of these to be able to pay them all.” Thus, Hamburg relied on “the patriotic ardor for liberty” embedded in the breasts of citizens. Citizens took up “and administer[ed] government offices as a honor (*Ehrendienst*), without monetary compensation.” This duty “citizens owe to the free state (*dem freien Staate*) that nourishes and protects them” and “whose constitution guards their civic rights from arbitrary attack” on their persons and seizure of their goods. “Whoever aspires to the rights and pretensions of an [ordinary] Hamburg citizen, must only have a [respectable] occupation (*Nahrstand*) and be able to maintain himself therein.” But, “whoever wants to be an active citizen (*Staatsbürger*), a participant in and representative (*Behaupter*) of the republic, has sacred [and] precious duties, and receives [only] as payment [for his efforts] that most valuable of all feelings”: freedom. Of a Hamburg citizen, “one cannot say that he serves, but also not that he commands. He does not even serve the state for he is the state.” Moreover, Hess went on, “there is scarcely a citizen of Hamburg above the class of laborer or servant who, having once settled here and opened his business, is not almost immediately selected by his fellow citizens to fill a parish office, and so onwards and upwards

[he moves] through the civic departments to become a participant in the administration of the police, of justice, of [urban] charities (*milde Anstalten*), commerce, the treasury, and [eventually] legislation.” How much better off, Hess argued, was a state governed and tended by free citizens than by “compensated ne’er-do-wells” who hold sinecures and entrust vital civic matters to poorly-paid drudges who lacked all stake in the polity or its well-being.⁵

Poor relief, too, fit in this framework and was tightly wound into the ways in which Hamburg had been governed especially since the Reformation. The Reformation *did* make a difference, too, in the provision of poor relief, if not, however, in terms of a simple secularization of relief once - erroneously - postulated. We all know now that many of the innovations in poor relief that the Reformation supposedly introduced were already in place in the late middle ages and that, for instance, city councils in many places – Hamburg included – had already assumed stewardship over the financial affairs of major beneficent foundations, including ecclesiastical ones. Thus the basis for the later appearance of “semipublic” institutions – those which grafted private initiatives to public benefit – was already well-grounded by 1500.

Still, the Reformation in Hamburg elaborated and further institutionalized the already existing structural bond between government and charity. The reorganization of poor relief laid down the foundations for a thorough reshaping of government and political life in Hamburg. Additionally, it opened up opportunities for more citizens to participate in communal affairs and augmented to some degree the strength of the Bürgerschaft in relation to the Senat. During the Reformation ancient and relatively impotent parish councils spawned three new collegial bodies – the Aldermen, the Sixty, and the One Hundred and Eighty – each endowed with significantly

⁵von Heß, *Hamburg*, 2: 321-24.

enhanced communal responsibilities. These councils were originally designed to supervise all parish affairs, including poor relief, but soon became permanent governmental organs. The parish of St. Nicolai set up the first *Gotteskasten* or community chest fully two years before the promulgation of Johannes Bugenhagen's *Kirchen-Ordnung* in 1529. From their own ranks, parish officers chose twelve men as deacons or *Gotteskastenverwalter* to distribute poor-box funds and to advise the parish on the appointment of pastors and schoolteachers. These "devout men" were then organized formally into a permanent collegial body, the Sixty. Although at first the Sixty was only charged with superintending parish matters, it soon gained the right of advising the Senat on "all that touches the prosperity and tranquility of our good city."⁶ (Relations between these bodies and the Senat in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were often tumultuous and their disputes repeatedly boiled over into open violence and virtual civil war. That story is well-known and needs not be pursued here.⁷)

Each parish also selected twenty-four subdeacons and it was from this larger body that the deacons handpicked their successors. The sixty deacons and the 120 subdeacons then combined in a second collegial body, the One Hundred Eighty. While its cumbersome size meant that it

⁶Hans-Dieter Loose and Werner Jochmann, eds., *Hamburg: Geschichte der Stadt und ihrer Bewohner* (Hamburg: Hoffmann & Campe, 1982), 1: 211-15; Georg Daur, *Von Predigern und Bürgern: Eine hamburgische Kirchengeschichte von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart* (Hamburg: Agentur des Rauhen Hauses, 1970), 13-80; Johann Klefeker, *Sammlung der Hamburgischen Gesetze und Verfassungen in Bürger- und Kirchlichen, auch Cammer- Handlungs- und übrigen Policy-Angelegenheiten und Geschäften samt historischen Einleitung* (Hamburg: Piscator, 1765), 1: 128.

⁷See Hans-Dieter Loose, "Die Jastram-Snitgerschen Wirren in der zeitgenössischen Geschichtsschreibung" *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Hamburgische Geschichte* 53 (1967): 1-20; C. F. Wurm, *Der europäische Hintergrund der Snitger-Jastram'schen Wirren in Hamburg 1786* (Hamburg: Akademisches & Realgymnasium, 1855); Hermann Rückleben, *Die Niederwerfung der hamburgischen Ratsgewalt: Kirchliche Bewegungen und bürgerliche Unruhen im ausgehenden 17. Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: Christians, 1970); Gisela Rückleben, *Senat und Bürgerschaft in Hamburg 1595-1686: Innere Bindungen und Gegensätze* (dissertation, Marburg am Lahn, 1969).

exercised little direct or immediate influence in government, it served more purposes than merely supplying a pool of suitable candidates for the deaconate. The first step in public life for most men involved election as a subdeacon and from there one could climb the steps of the *cursus honorum*. Membership in the One Hundred Eighty determined further eligibility for all the *ehrenämtliche* appointments in Hamburg's government and to any one of the many deputations and collegia that became the substance of political life for those who ascended to the pinnacles of power (as Ratsherren or Bürgermeister or Aldermen) and also for those who did not. The fifteen senior deacons, three from each parish, made up the powerful college of Aldermen, who mediated between Senat and Bürgerschaft.⁸

Hamburg's constitution delegated to subdeacons and deacons the real work of parish relief. Subdeacons, for instance, passed the Sunday collection plate or bag - the *Klingbeutel* – and then conducted the twice weekly handouts of bread and alms. Deacons also investigated the living conditions of the poor, visiting them in their lodgings to gauge their needs and deservedness. They were cautioned not to allow this important task to devolve on minor, “mercenary” parish officials. Deacons met weekly to decide on distributions. Parish relief so constituted sought to replicate a smoothly running Christian community, where each member assumed his inseparable religious and civic duties. Such parish relief was also calculated to eliminate the capriciousness of individual charity as well as to protect the feelings and anonymity

⁸Buek, *Die hamburgischen Oberalten*, 302, 494; Ursula Rotzoll, “Kastenordnungen der Reformationszeit: Von der mittelalterlichen zur neuzeitlichen Armenpflege,” typescript, Examsarbeit 1969, StAHbg, Handschriftensammlung 695; Westphalen, *Hamburgs Verfassung und Verwaltung*, 1: 216-19; Walther Peter Möller, *Chronologisches, bis auf die neuesten Zeiten fortgesetztes Verzeichniss der bisherigen Mitglieder eines Hochedlen und Hochweisen Rathes, der Ehrbaren Oberalten und der Verordneten löblicher Cämmerey der Freyen Stadt Hamburg* (Hamburg: Meißner, 1820); Daur, *Von Predigern und Bürgern*, 330-36.

of the deserving or the “shame-faced” poor. If the ideal was never quite achieved, and if the system degenerated, as its critics insisted, into nothing more than careless scattering of alms, that was neither the intention nor the spirit in which the city refounded poor relief during the Reformation and continued to tinker with it in subsequent decades.

If one seeks yet another concrete illustration of how voluntarism worked in respect to poor relief, one can turn to the administration of the Zuchthaus, which, since the 1720s, had been integrated into the municipal system of welfare. In the mid 1720s, in the wake of the plague debacle and in the atmosphere of economic malaise that hung over the city in those years, the reform of poor relief became an object of discussion in the issues of Germany’s premier moral weekly, *Der Patriot*. The respected Bürgermeister and poet, Barthold Heinrich Brockes, noted that despite the many “splendid institutions” that existed for the relief of the poor, the numbers of “brazen beggars” continued to increase. Declaring himself “as great a friend of the poor man as the declared enemy of the beggar,” he isolated the real problem as that of providing work, sustenance, and care for the “worthy” poor, a task that had become immeasurable more difficult as the city’s population approached the 70-80,000 mark.⁹

These discussions resulted in a new plan for poor relief that Brockes shepherded through the Senat and which the Bürgerschaft approved in October 1725. It provided for “an auxiliary form of support,” defined as “free work” done outside the spatial confines of the Zuchthaus. The task chosen was stocking-knitting.¹⁰ The Zuchthaus itself was, like all the other “poor houses” in

⁹*Der Patriot* 37 (13 September 1724).

¹⁰“Proposition E. E. Raths an die Erbgesessene Bürgerschaft, vom 4. Oct. 1725”; “Neue Armen-Ordnung, und Anweisung zur Abschaffung der Gassen-Betteley, daß nemlich die nothleidenden Armen sich bey den Provisoren des Werk- und Zucht-Hauses, zum Wollen-Spinnen und Strumpf-Stricken

Hamburg, administered by a council of governors (*Provisoren*), whose chairman and membership rotated. Members of the Senat served as patrons, but decisions about specific issues of governance, on whom to admit and how to support them, for instance, fell to the governors. In the reform of 1726, another communal institution, that of the citizens' militia, played a central role. The militia captains (another *ehrenämtliche* parish office) were called upon to compile accurate lists of the poor (now referred to as the registered poor [*eingeschriebene Arme*]). Minor Zuchthaus officials – *paid* officials – distributed yarn or wool to the registered poor for spinning in their homes and purchased back the finished goods. Thus, once again, honorary officers made the crucial decisions all along the line.¹¹ The new system provided work for about 2500 people although it quickly ran into problems. Stocking-knitting proved barely able to sustain a family no matter how hard its members toiled; the quality of the product was generally inferior and the putting-out system aroused the suspicion and hostility of other artisans who feared subsidized competition.

Poor relief reform became a matter for public discussion again in the hard times after 1763, when depression, currency deflation, and serious mercantilistic competition troubled Hamburg. The basic *principles* instituted during the Reformation and preserved in the new system inaugurated in 1726 did not form bones of contention. Rather, staffing was perceived as the basic problem. Two realizations underlay renewed debate and determined its terms. The first

melden sollen,” Johann Friedrich Blank, *Sammlung der von E. Hochedlen Rathe der Stadt Hamburg sowol zur Handhabung der Gesetze und Verfassungen als bey besondern Eräugnissen*, . . . (Hamburg: Piscator, 1764), 2: 1062-69; Klefeker, *Sammlung*, 1: 298-304, 408-22.

¹¹“Neue Armen-Ordnung,” Blank, *Sammlung*, 2: 1064-65; “Notifikation wegen der Strumpf-Strickerey bey dem Werk- und Zuchthaus,” *ibid.*, 2: 1075.

was the gradual acceptance, at least among astute political economists, that structural features conditioned the poverty of the 1770s and 1780s and that these were directly related to the unpredictable growth of a global economy in which Hamburg so vigorously participated. The second problem was internal to poor relief and perhaps inevitable under the conditions generated by this new economy and by the growing size of the city's population: how to combine voluntarism and expedience. How could poor relief be constructed to be efficient – in terms of time, money, and personnel – and yet not require a paid core of officials? Poor relief, therefore, was always construed within larger frameworks of government and the economy. It was gauged not only to relieve the poor but also to educate and draw more citizens into active civic service. For the most part, and despite changing times, few people suggested that anything except the traditional values that had always sustained the city were the proper answer.

Johann Georg Büsch, one of the major architects of poor relief reform in Hamburg in the 1770s and 1780s and a noted political economist, acknowledged both tasks. He had earlier produced sophisticated historical analyses of Hamburg's economy and the effect of what he deemed its "peculiar workings" on the poor. In his many writings, he dedicated almost as much attention to economic factors as to administrative and organizational ones. In reviewing the past history of poor relief in Hamburg up to the middle of the eighteenth century, Büsch praised almost as much as he condemned. He judged the theory embedded in parish relief "capital." He found less to value in its execution and located the source of shortcomings in the faulty assignment of duties. Although the deacons technically ran poor relief, in point of fact, the Aldermen shouldered the burden along with, to a more limited degree, the Sixty. The Aldermen tended to be elderly men lacking perhaps the vigor the job demanded, while they, like the Sixty,

also bore other governmental responsibilities. They were, therefore, often unable to carry out what Büsch considered the *sine qua non* of an effective “modern” poor relief: the thorough and repeated visitation of each and every pauper family in its lodgings. One might solve the problem by hiring a corps of paid visitors, but Büsch and others involved in poor relief and medical reform firmly rejected that solution as antithetical to the constitution of a free republic, governed by citizens.¹²

The General Poor Relief established in 1788 replicated in its sinews the principles of voluntarism enshrined in its founding articles. Virtually every paragraph of its charter underscored its volitional character. The number of paid officials remained tiny and included only, for instance, messengers, clerks, spinning and weaving instructors, and the like. *Ehrenämtliche* officials -- the Relief Officers (*Armen-Pfleger*) and Directors (*Armen-Vorsteher*) assumed the lion’s share of work.¹³ The creators of the General Poor Relief built deliberately and explicitly on older bases, but were influenced by two recent experiments initiated by “private persons”: a Spinning-Institute in 1785 and a more expansive program of medical relief first set up in 1768. Both publicized the idea that private persons, citizens in this case, were best positioned to experiment on a limited scale to determine the feasibility of projects and then,

¹²Johann Georg Büsch, “Historischer Bericht von dem Gange und fortdauernden Verfall des Hamburgischen Armenwesens seit der Zeit der Reformation,” in idem, *Zwei kleine Schriften die im Werk begriffene Verbesserung des Armenswesens in dieser Stadt Hamburg betreffend* (Hamburg: n.p., 1786), §§ 5-9; Caspar Voght, *Gesammeltes aus der Geschichte der Hamburgischen Armen-Anstalt während ihrer fünfzigjährigen Dauer* (Hamburg: Meißner, 1838), 6. Büsch wrote voluminously on economics. Among his most important publications relevant here are: *Schriften über Staatswirtschaft und Handlung* (3 vols.; Hamburg: Bohn, 1780-84) and *Grundriß einer Geschichte der merkwürdigsten Welthandel neuerer Zeit* (Hamburg: Carl Ernst Bohn, 1781).

¹³“Neue Armen-Ordnung,” 3 September 1788, in *Sammlung hamburgischer Verordnungen* (Hamburg: n.p., 1789), 2: 341-76.

having carefully evaluated strengths and weaknesses, success and failures, either reject, modify, or adopt them.

Although much has been made of such endeavors as examples, for instance, of a developing public sphere (à la Habermas), it is crucial to situate these endeavors carefully in time and place. We are not, I argue, dealing here with a form of “free collectivism.” And even Tocqueville’s sense of associational life does not quite hit the mark. There existed, for example, considerable overlap between those highly placed in government, members of the Hamburg Society for the Promotion of the Useful Arts and Crafts, better known as the Patriotic Society, and the benefactors and sponsors of both the Spinning Institute and the new Medical Reliefs. Thus, the distinction between private and public in this context does not quite reflect the reality of the situation.

The Spinning Institute was established in October 1785. Three of Hamburg’s most energetic and engaged “patriots” - Caspar Voght, J. F. Behrens, and J. Daniel Klefeker (Behrens and Klefeker were, or became, members of the Senat) – sought to “unite our strength [in the search to discover] something by which the impoverished inhabitants of this city would gain a means to earn a basic living even when their regular form of employment ceases.” “One sees it as his duty,” Voght wrote, “to publicize these ventures. . . . Perhaps a public relief can turn to its own use this private attempt which has already mastered the profound obstacles [confronting] any new enterprise and, with more ample resources, run it more advantageously.”¹⁴ Historians have generally defined the “patriotism” of the mid eighteenth century expressed here as

¹⁴“Etwas über eine in Hamburg im Oktober 1785 gestiftete Anstalt zum Unterricht im Kaufgarn-Spinnen und zur Ausbreitung dieses Gewerbes,” *Adreß-Comtoir-Nachrichten* [hereafter: *ACN*] (29 March 1787).

“primarily a social, and not, as it was in antiquity and was again to become, a political concept. . . . Typically, the ‘patriot’ of eighteenth-century France was a man who had done something to promote the common good.”¹⁵ While this is a perfectly good definition in most respects, it tends to ignore the fact that our patriots in Hamburg lived in a very different relationship with the government than did most French patriots. Hamburg’s patriots governed their city or were close to those who did.

Far more ambitious was a medical relief that developed in three phases; first, on quite a small scale in 1768, then on a larger footing in 1778, and finally as a central part of the General Poor Relief of 1788. Although the dimensions of these endeavors varied, they all remained true to the principles enunciated in 1768: “to save the lives and [preserve] the health of thousands”; “to return many upright and honest workers to the state”; and “to reduce the distress of suffering humanity.”¹⁶ A very similar group of patriots organized the effort. Büsch was once again prominent, but so, too, was a deacon from St. Michaelis Parish (the poorest in the city), Johann Mathias Lebrecht. Several physicians volunteered to provide free care and medicines. Despite a rather promising beginning, the enterprise folded after two years but revived in 1778 on much the same foundation albeit with considerably more financial and personnel support. Once again, Büsch was to the fore, this time in harness with Christoph Christian Sturm, pastor of St. Petri’s. The first two subscriptions attracted a total of 632 donors, prominent among them members of the Senat (Bürgermeisters, Ratsherren, and Syndici), Aldermen, pastors, and, inevitably,

¹⁵Harvey Chisick, *The Limits of Reform in the Enlightenment: Attitudes Toward the Education of the Lower Classes in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), 223-24.

¹⁶Nachricht an das Publikum,” *ACN* (14 May 1768)

members of the Patriotic Society. Thus, it is difficult to classify these endeavors as a fully new or fully private initiative, somehow detached from the more traditional roles of governing or citizenship.¹⁷

The thought of assisting suffering humanity might have gratified Büsch, Voght, and their compatriots, but at the same time, they explicitly addressed the other side of the equation: the benefit to Hamburg and its citizens gained from participating in such endeavors. Relief of the poor could be justified as enlightened self-interest, but it also formed a type of civic discipline that created better citizens: it was, in short, a school of civic virtue. Büsch extolled traditional values in managing the problems of the “modern” world and, more importantly here, argued that civic virtues thus inculcated were equally precious in perpetuating Hamburg’s republican heritage. He insisted that the self-rule of citizens could be as successful and as expedient as a monarch’s “force of will.”¹⁸

Although Büsch’s plans for involving a broad range of the citizenry in the “patriotic” task of poor relief did not experience full realization in the actual structure of the General Poor Relief, much was preserved. Büsch’s plans testify to how he and others like him continued to locate poor relief, citizenship, good government, and “republicanism” within traditional governmental and societal frameworks. The “republicanism” of cities like Hamburg (and Amsterdam, for that

¹⁷“Verzeichnis der Wohlthäter,” *ACN* (1 November 1779, 30 January 1783). On the progress of the Medical Relief established in 1778, see *Nachrichten von der neuerrichteten medicinischen Anstalt für kranke Haus-Arme in Hamburg* (Hamburg, 1781); *Zweite Sammlung von der Nachrichten vom medicinischen Armen-Institut in Hamburg: Vom 1sten Juli 1781 bis Januar 1784* (Hamburg, 1784); *Nachricht vom dem Fortgang des medicinischen Armen-Instituts in der letzten Hälfte des Jahrs 1787* (Hamburg, 1788).

¹⁸J.C. Bracke and J. G. Büsch, “Lezte Rechenschaft von dem Fortgange des medicinischen Armen-Instituts bis zu dessen Uebergang unter die Vorsorge der preiswürdigen Armen-Instituts,” *ACN* (11 June 1789).

matter) should not, of course, be equated with the republicanism that emerged from the French Revolution. But neither should it be lumped with the “republicanism” of the Anglo-Saxon world that has dominated much of the scholarly discussion. Wijnand Mijnhardt, for example, has recently pointed out that republicanism took a different course in polities such as Amsterdam republicanism than which historians like Gordon Wood and J. G. A. Pocock have postulated.¹⁹ Amsterdam and Hamburg’s republicans seldom dreaded how commerce affected civic virtue. In such republics, the merchant was the embodiment - not the antithesis – of republican civism. Büsch, for instance, valued commerce as a nursery of civic virtue fully as effective as participation in municipal *Ehrenämter*. His views were not unique. For most “patriots,” commerce and good government went hand-in-glove. Hamburg’s republicanism was certainly not a clearly articulated political program or ideology. Indeed, the concept often seemed most useful in defending Hamburg rhetorically from the aspirations of other states, especially monarchies.

Yet, Büsch was also aware that riches distanced one from the plight of one’s fellow humans and such separation inevitably eroded the strength of community. To combat, or rather to forestall, the possible evil effects of what may seem a more “bureaucratized” or “rationalized” poor relief, Büsch proposed that the entire city be divided into special districts. Each district was to be entrusted to a relief officer selected from, and by, fellow citizens. This modality would

¹⁹Wijnand W. Mijnhardt, “The Limits of Present-day Historiography of Republicanism,” *De achttiende eeuw* 27 (2005): 75-89. Of the more typical treatments on republicanism, see Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner, *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage* (2 vols.; Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1992); idem, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republic Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

preserve community feeling and avoid the necessity of paying people to do the job. (Patriots and republicans repeatedly excoriated the “paid minions” of monarchs.) Because the relief officer lived in his district, he would be familiar to the pauper seeking assistance and the relationship between them would at least approximate that of neighbor and friend rather than disciplinarian or even benefactor. “And in this way,” Büsch insisted, “the aid offered him [the pauper] would be more effective, the advice [given him] more pertinent, and the disciplining and education [applied] more opportune.”²⁰ One of the problems of organizing a large-scale poor relief -- how to avoid bureaucratic indifference and preserve a sense of humanity and charity – would thus be neatly solved.

Büsch acknowledged that while the growth of Hamburg (population had by then topped the 100,000 mark) probably destroyed irrevocably any sense of community that the city had once supposedly enjoyed as a whole, civic responsibility could be reaffirmed and reconstituted in the more restricted realm of the neighborhood or, rather, the relief district. If Büsch was especially interested in breathing new life into civic spirit in the service of poor relief, he also had put his finger on the broader political issues involved. Could a political form originally developed in a relatively small, compact, and familiar commune be successfully adapted to, or preserved in, a much larger and more diverse urban community, one that also was experiencing rapid change? This new form of poor relief promised to do just that by involving the middling range of Hamburg’s citizens more deeply in communal affairs while they were simultaneously becoming

²⁰Johann Georg Büsch, “Vorschläge zur Verbesserung des Hamburgischen Armenwesens 1786,” in *StAHbg*, AAI, 1; idem, “Allgemeine Winke zur Verbesserung des Armenwesens,” in *Zwei kleine Schriften*. Büsch was strongly influenced by the work of John MacFarlan, *Inquiries Concerning the Poor* (Edinburgh: J. Dickson, 1782).

more distant from the centers of power and perhaps suffering from the exigencies of commercial and economic revolutions. Büsch clearly hoped to attract those who had seldom assumed civic posts higher than deacons or subdeacon (or perhaps militia captain). The underlying idea was to forge – or reforge – bonds between them and wealthier, politically active citizens. He felt that one could accept different roles for each, but by engaging both groups in the same enterprise weld them together with a solder of civic commitment. He understood that wealthy men probably were not the best candidates to be allotted “the task of individual supervision.” These more prominent persons could, however, be “entrusted with the overall administration” especially as they could be “safely relied on in monetary matters.” While undoubtedly the “most trustworthy accountants” for the poor, they were not “their most serviceable overseers.” In place of bureaucrats, Büsch wanted to draw in as many citizens as possible. Divvying up the chores also eased the burden on individuals or at least that was the goal. Yet, Büsch also recognized that service in poor relief *could* be the first step in a more ambitious civic and political career. He regarded participation in such communal affairs as the necessary instruction for good “average” citizens but believed it even more critical for those who would eventually sit on the benches of the Senat and steer the ship of state.²¹ A well-organized poor relief, therefore, depended as much on educating prosperous citizens in their duties as in controlling or disciplining the poor. It was equally essential to wean the well-off from traditional alms-giving and teach them to accept modifications in how charity was best distributed in what had become a metropolis. At the same time he was, probably unwittingly, also grappling with thorny issues of

²¹Büsch, “Vorschläge zur Verbesserung” and idem, *Ein Wort an die Bürger Hamburgs über die Nichtachtung brauchbarer Gelehrsamkeit in der Erziehung ihrer Söhne und den daher rührenden Verfall unserer beiden öffentlichen Lehrinstitute* (Hamburg: Hoffmann, 1800).

governing raised by the traumas and possibilities of mid to late eighteenth-century economic, social, demographic, and political developments.²²

The new General Poor Relief did not actualize everything Büsch envisioned. Still, his spirit to a large extent guided how the administrative framework was constructed. Older ideals of civic community, admittedly somewhat modified, were rooted in the very structure of the General Poor Relief. The city was divided into five districts (*Armen-Bezirke*) each under the supervision of two directors. Districts cut across parish lines in order to distribute needy families more evenly among them. Each district was then further divided into twelve quarters, with each quarter falling to the supervision of three relief officers; thus 180 relief officers carried out the multitudinous tasks of poor relief in Hamburg.²³

The overall direction and the responsibility of policy-making belonged to a council whose composition blended tradition and (some) innovation. On it sat five members of the Senat, two Aldermen, the ten directors, five Gotteskastenverwalter, and the senior governor of each poorhouse: the *Waisenhaus*, the *Zuchthaus*, and the *Pesthof*. The choice of the directors was judged critical and the older, parish-based collegial body of the Sixty picked them. Directors were to be chosen from “the entire citizenry, that is, from all those in the civic nexus and qualified for other civic offices,” although many came from the Sixty itself. They assumed positions for life unless excused for good reasons of health or business or if elected Ratsherr or member of the treasury. Over the course of time, some directors had actually once been relief

²²Büsch, “Historischer Bericht,” §§ 36-38 and idem, *Erfahrungen* (Hamburg: Hoffmann, 1794), 4: 22-24.

²³“Neue Armen-Ordnung.”

officers, but acting as a relief officer in no way formed a requirement or even a desideratum for the higher position. Those who became directors seemed to have had their feet already firmly on the ladder of communal power and the post of “director” wrote just another line on their *curriculum vitae*. They either already had – or rapidly assumed – leading roles in the municipality, being or becoming Ratsherren, syndici, or Aldermen. Only exceptionally did men who served as relief officers rise so far.²⁴

Thus, to a large extent directors belonged to the general run of persons who already governed Hamburg and who filled important municipal offices. Although many were members of the Patriotic Society, one should not see them as “new men” or the Society as a unique form of public activity. The Patriotic Society and the groups that organized “private” initiatives such as the Spinning Institute and the 1768 and 1779 Medical Reliefs in some ways approximate closely an ideal type of associational life independent of government. None was government sponsored – or at least not officially. But just as certainly the support and drive of the men who sat in government, or who had the ear of those who did, was determinant. Moreover, government officeholders were prominently represented in the membership of the Patriotic Society and the General Poor Relief.²⁵

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to deny certain novelties. For at least two men the General Poor Relief and the Patriotic Society provided new avenues for civic participation. Caspar Voght was the son of a Ratsherr and a merchant. Yet, he distanced himself from politics

²⁴StAHbg, AAI, 9, 12 [Personalverzeichnis der Allgemeine Armenanstalt; printed as part of *Hamburgischer Staats-Kalender*] and 15.

²⁵See Mary Lindemann, “Bürgerliche Karriere und patriotische Philanthropie: Armenpolitik in Hamburg vor und nach der Reform von 1788,” *Jahrbuch der Sozialarbeit* 4 (1981): 157-80.

and never took the leading or even active role his breeding might have suggested. He was, however, indefatigable in his exertions for the General Poor Relief, almost single-handedly organizing or running important parts of it, in particular its Spinning Institute. A similar observation pertains to Johann Arnold Günther, although his history also differs from Voght's. Trained as a lawyer, Günther tried to establish a governmental and legal career, but experienced a conspicuous lack of success in his early years. He then became the secretary of the Patriotic Society and was perhaps more responsible than anyone for the vigor it demonstrated in the late 1770s and 1780s. He, too, was a central figure in the General Poor Relief as head of its expansive Medical Deputation. Günther, unlike Voght, however, became a Ratsherr in 1792. His civic career, then, can be seen as illustrating how one could use a "voluntary" organization like the General Poor Relief as a springboard from which to launch a normal political life. Still, he, like Voght, was unusual and the vast majority of directors followed a far more traditional political path, although serving as director was more frequently seen as a useful (but by no means necessary) step for anyone with larger political aspirations.²⁶

Relief officers were different animals altogether and far less prominent in the larger community or on the bigger political stage. Büsch had wanted to have the inhabitants of quarters select relief officers directly. But, in fact, when it came to picking them, the council relied on an older method: they were chosen from the subdeacons – the One Hundred Eighty – of each parish and did not even necessarily live in their relief district. Officers were supposed to serve for three years and, when the senior member rotated off, he was to submit a list of two candidates from which his successor would be named, thus allowing him to forge or perpetuate links of clientage

²⁶Lindemann, *Patriots and Paupers*, 125-29.

and patronage that ran throughout Hamburg's government. Relief officer was yet another obligatory *Ehrenamt*. Only members of the Senat and the Relief council, the Aldermen, and the delegates to the treasury, as well as men over sixty, could be excused, although they were free to take up the duty if they wished. It was possible to be selected for a second, or even third term. And re-selection became extremely common.²⁷

Few relief officers played substantial roles in Hamburg's government. If the position of director could vault a man into the company of political movers and shakers, that of relief officer generally did not. Not all remained political Lilliputians, of course, and one significant exception was Ferdinand Beneke (whose detailed diary provides information on his activities in poor relief as well as painting a rich panorama of Hamburg society). Beneke was born in Bremen and studied law in Göttingen. When he returned to his father's birthplace, Hamburg, in 1795 he set up a legal practice and embarked on a career in communal life and politics. He became a relief officer in 1798. From 1800-1804 he sat on the bench of the Lower Court (*Niedergericht*) and in 1816 achieved the influential post of secretary to the Aldermen. While his diary reveals that he regarded his poor relief duties as an essential aspect of his civic life, it is equally clear that his education as a lawyer – and not his activities as relief officer – best accounts for his political rise.²⁸ Most other relief officers held only minor civic offices, partly because a goodly

²⁷“Neue Armen-Ordnung,” 348-49; Council Session, 10 April 1788, StAHbg, AAI, 9, vol. 3; and *Hamburgischer Staatskalender*, 1788-1792.

²⁸Franklin Kopitzsch, *Grundzüge einer Sozialgeschichte der Aufklärung in Hamburg und Altona* (Hamburg: Hans Christians, 1982), 399-400, 420-21, 564-68, and passim; Rudolf Kayser, *Die Oberalten: Festschrift zum 400jährigen Gedächtnis der Einsetzung des Kollegiums* (Hamburg: Broschek, 1928); Renate Hauschild-Thiessen, “Hamburg um die Wende vom 18. zum 19. Jahrhundert: Tagebuchaufzeichnungen Ferdinand Benekes,” *Hamburgische Geschichts- und Heimatsblätter* 9, no. 8 (December 1974): 187-88.

percentage were merchants (35% in 1790, for example). While some positions in government were reserved for men of business, many others required a legal degree. Over the course of time, the social status of relief officers tended to decline somewhat with ever more artisans and apothecaries appearing on the rolls.²⁹

If the polity's virtue and survival depended on the committed patriotic involvement of citizens – in poor relief and elsewhere – so, too, was it necessary to avoid taxing the population for charitable purposes. Whereas cameralists had often ventured the idea of levying a poor tax (*Armen-Steuer*) to offset the costs of poor relief, Hamburg vigorously rejected it.³⁰ Büsch opposed a poor-tax because it would lead to a careless distribution of alms and also frustrate attempts to deal with the most essential task of returning the poor to useful employment (which was, in his estimation, the only real solution to the “problem” of poverty). But Büsch also feared that a poor-tax would dehumanize poverty and open a gap between the richer citizens and the objects of their charity. It would stifle, not foster, civic concern in the same way that using paid officials to conduct poor relief tasks would eliminate the desirable contact between prosperous citizens and their less fortunate brethren.³¹ A less idealistic reason perhaps lay in the

²⁹Information here was gathered from a comparison of the list of Relief Officers in the *Hamburgischer Staatskalender* and the occupations as listed in *Neues hamburgisches Adreßbuch*, 1787-92. One apothecary who served as Relief Officer recorded his experiences in his memoirs, see Theodor Hasche, *Das Leben eines Hamburger Apothekers, Erinnerungen aus der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Renate Hauschild-Thiessen (Hamburg: Gesellschaft der Bücherfreunde zu Hamburg, 1981).

³⁰Johann Joachim Becher, *Politischer discurs, von den eigentlichen Ursachen des Auff- und Abnehmens der Städt Länder und Republiken in Specie, Wie ein Land Volckreich und Nahrhafft zu machen/ und in eine recht Societatem civilem zu bringen* (Frankfurt: Johann David Zunners, 1673), quoted in Joachim Heinrich Peter, *Probleme der Armut in den Lehren der Kameralisten: (Eine dogmengeschichtliche Studien* (Berlin: E. Ebering, 1934), 203.

³¹Büsch, “Historischer Bericht,” § 35.

unwillingness of the Senat to introduce new taxes that would only stir up difficulties with the Bürgerschaft. Hamburg's civil peace was seldom disturbed after 1712. Part of the reason why was that the Senat and Bürgerschaft, as much as possible, sedulously side-stepped situations guaranteed to raise conflict.

As there were no easy solutions to the problems of staffing poor relief in a large city, so, too, was financing beset with difficulties. How did one prevent begging *and* casual alms-giving, and yet generate sufficient funds to cover the admittedly great expenses of a comprehensive program of relief? If one removed the poor from the sight of their benefactors, did one also run the risk of stopping the wellsprings of charity? More money alone provided no answers. Hamburg already spent huge amounts on charity. Büsch drew ammunition against poor-taxes from the English experience. In England, vast sums gleaned from the rates had been squandered on relief: "Mismanagement has employed [the moneys], with very few exceptions, as a reward for sloth, idleness, impudence, untruth, [and] has reared up new generations of poor wretches to a life of disgusting profligacy."³² Money was, of course, essential, but it proved useless or even counter-productive unless one could plant and nurture a new philanthropic ethic. Only voluntarism offered fertile soil for nourishing that civism. The idea of a poor tax was (or should be) ideologically repugnant to free citizens. The misuse of taxes or fraud in their collection were not the most serious problems. Poor-taxes were more deeply questionable. These mercenary and obligatory means of financing could only diminish, not increase, citizens' own zeal for civic affairs. The collection and distribution of taxes would also inevitably necessitate the creation of a paid, and probably predatory, core of officials.

³²Ibid., § 34.

Yet could one preserve charity and charitable impulses and still avoid the negative effects of casual charity? The solution implemented with the beginning of the relief was to rely on a weekly collection, a solution that may not seem very innovative. Still, the virtue of this particular system lay in its character as not quite voluntary but also not a tax. Each week one citizen went around his quarter and solicited collections from his neighbors. He was to keep a careful record of the amount each person or household pledged. While it was not mandatory to give, the procedure was clearly coercive. Many involved in shaping the General Poor Relief expressed disquietude about even this level of persuasion. Could it, too, stifle charity?³³

Financing in the General Poor Relief developed rather differently. The proceeds of collections always supplied a major portion of its total operating capital. But the size of collections ebbed and flowed in synchrony with more general economic conditions. In times of little need and general prosperity, there was money enough. But during economic crises, when misery was greatest, contributions slacked off. In 1799, for instance, the Relief collected a not inconsiderable sum of 140,059 Thalers, but spent 164,160 and that trend continued (with few exceptions) through the first decade and a half of the nineteenth century.³⁴

Voluntary giving alone never sustained the programs of the General Poor Relief. The Senat and Bürgerschaft subsidized the relief in part from its very inception by diverting to its use

³³Büsch, *Erfahrungen*, 3: 22-23; Adolf Streng, *Geschichte der Gefängnisverwaltung in Hamburg von 1622-1872* (Hamburg: Verlag-Anstalt und Dr. AG, 1890), 30-36.

³⁴The results of collections were reported regularly in the *Nachrichten von der Einrichtung und dem Fortgang der Hamburgischen Armen-Anstalt*, Nos. 1-54 in 2 vols (1788-1840). The best analysis of the finances of the General Poor Relief is Paul Kollmann, "Ueberblick über die Wirksamkeit der 'Allgemeinen Armenanstalt' der Stadt Hamburg vom 1788 bis 1870," *Statistik des Hamburgischen Staats* 3 (1871): 99-136, here 132-33.

a repeatedly levied property tax – the *Grabengeld*. Other sources of income were added: the Relief regularly received one-third of the semiannual collection taken up to benefit the Zuchthaus and a further sum from the *Gotteskasten*.³⁵ In the increasingly hard times of the early nineteenth century, these moneys made up an ever larger percentage of the now, much-reduced expenditures of the Relief. The disasters of those years had pretty much destroyed the Relief’s most cherished projects – its educational programs for children, its loans to needy workers, and, above all, its program of medical care. After 1815, they never regained their former extension or glory.

Conclusions

Long before the end of the eighteenth century, indeed already by its second decade, the city of Hamburg faced a series of interrelated problems that derived from several critical shifts in the world about it and within its walls. Changes in the European economic structure, such as the growing globalization of trade from which Hamburg (in the long run) more benefitted than suffered, altered the character of the laboring population in Hamburg and at the same time made it tremulously sensitive – as Büsch realized – to both long-term and momentary fluctuations in trade. Sheer population growth also generated differences because it stemmed largely from immigration. The city generally facilitated the settling of immigrants, both wealthy ones and those whose only assets were the helping hands vital to trade, commerce, and industry. All these factors strained the traditional institutions of government and social welfare that Hamburg had inherited from the past and which, with few exceptions, its governors sought to preserve. The problem became how to deal with bigger tasks of governing – including a range of social welfare

³⁵Lindemann, *Patriots and Paupers*, 174-76; Kollmann, “Ueberblick.”

programs – without upsetting the applecart of somewhat over-ripe but still-delectable civic fruits. The solution adopted in Hamburg blended, as we have seen, the old and the new, but there was considerably more of the former than the latter. Everything proposed and attempted in the mid to late eighteenth century in the realm of poor relief and medical care continued to draw on the concept and practice of voluntarism. Anything more radical - such as introducing a more professionalized cohort of relief officers or instituting a poor-tax - was never seriously considered because such seemed to jeopardize the urban constitution. Thus, it was not easy to innovate “just” in poor relief because alterations in social welfare policies would inevitably shake existing governmental structures. Hamburgers did not lack for ideas, nor did self-interest, parsimony, and sloth limit what could be attempted.. Yet all innovations faltered before the desire to preserve a hard-won political peace and to maintain a political culture that allowed for a certain kind of “political participation” but one which was not based on the equality of rights. It was hard to imagine how a more democratic system could have evolved without the development of a paid civil service and the necessary separation of justice from administration, that is, what the eighteenth century called “policing.” The latter comprised poor relief and medical care as well as a wide variety of other civic tasks. To sunder them from the whole apparatus of civic governing would also suggest that their execution required a greater expertise than Hamburg’s government-by-amateurs possessed. Thus, to a large extent, and despite the initiatives of the patriots and poor relief reformers of the 1770s and 1780s, the French maxim held: *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.*