

Poverty as an Economic Question: Josiah Child and Dudley North on the English Settlement Act

The debate sparked by Parliament's 1685 revision of the Settlement Act, the amendment to the Elizabethan Poor Law that severely restricted the mobility of the poor, indicates the growing significance of economics for late seventeenth-century English thought about poverty. No longer considered primarily an issue of public safety or social justice, poverty was re-conceptualized in terms of its economic causes and consequences. Reflecting the shift toward national productivity as a central concern of English economic thought, writers on the Settlement Act posed the question: What sort of poverty policy would most enhance the productivity and wealth of the nation?

This paper analyzes the policy proposals of two participants in the debate on the Settlement Act, both prominent merchants, Sir Josiah Child and Sir Dudley North. While beginning with common assumptions about the maximization of productivity and the national wealth—which lead both authors to reject the Settlement Act, on the grounds that it diminishes the productive efficiency of the poor—Child's "Concerning the Relief and Employment of the Poor" (1693) and North's "Some Notes Concerning the Laws on the Poor" (1685) arrive at dramatically opposed conclusions. The former advocates the centralization of poor relief administration, while the latter proposes a market mechanism for poor relief based on the absence of government intervention. This comparison, I argue, reveals the breadth of policy proposals that could be derived from late seventeenth-century economic assumptions, demonstrating that a concern for national productivity did not commit a thinker to supporting state control of production. North's proposal differs from Child's not in its emphasis on production but in its view of labor as a tradable commodity. This innovation enabled North to think beyond a statist framework while retaining many of the preoccupations common to economic thinkers of his time. I explore the internal logic of Child's and North's arguments, as well as a shared intellectual context which generated an early precursor to contemporary debates on poverty.