

COMMENT

Paradigms of Poverty: A Comment.

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John Veit-Wilson writes fascinatingly about the early work of Seebohm Rowntree. As a consequence all those who quote Rowntree will do so in future with greater care. In at least one respect, however, he wrongly attributes error to commentators like myself and does an injustice to Rowntree himself. He states, 'it is a common error among authors to assume that in 1899 Rowntree used an income measure to identify and count the poor' (1986, p.72). He is quite right to go on to point out that in practice Rowntree's investigators reported back on styles of living rather than expenditure on necessities. But there is no doubt from Rowntree's pages that he *intended* both primary and secondary poverty to be operationally measured in terms of the subsistence standard which he set out carefully in pages 86–110 of his first book. He defined 'primary' poverty as insufficient income to match this standard and 'secondary' poverty as insufficient expenditure on the sub-categories of that standard, whatever the income. It was this which established his claim to being a pioneering social scientist. Compared with Charles Booth he gave much more emphasis to the ranking or classification of families by family income and to the complex and scientific task of establishing 'a minimum standard of necessary expenditure'. This was also of immense political value since it enabled politicians and administrators to reconcile some of the then-existing views about the improvidence or mismanagement of the poor.

The crucial justification can be found in Rowntree's definition of secondary poverty as families 'whose total earnings would be sufficient for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency (i.e. the conception to which commentators, including myself, have called attention as lying at the heart of his definition of primary poverty) *were it not that some portion of it is absorbed by other expenditure either useful or wasteful*. To ascertain this by direct inquiry it would have been necessary to know, in every case, the average sum spent weekly on drink, gambling and other wasteful expenditure, and to ascertain also whether the wife was a thrifty housekeeper or the reverse' (1901, p.115) (my emphasis). He went on

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to explain that instead of pursuing this ideal procedure he adopted an alternative procedure by which his investigators noted down cases of 'obvious want and squalor' and provided other information which enabled him to 'arrive at a fair estimate of the total number of persons living in poverty in York'. If he had been intending to adopt a criterion different from income I believe he would have discussed it at some length. Veit-Wilson seems to be mistaken in believing that 'appearance and behaviour, not income, were "foremost" in his mind' (1986, p.77).

REFERENCES

- B.S. Rowntree (1901) *Poverty: A Study of Town Life*, Macmillan, London.
J.H. Veit-Wilson (1986), 'Paradigms of Poverty: A Rehabilitation of B.S. Rowntree', *Journal of Social Policy*, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp.69-99.