

***What has the North ever done for Social Policy?
The contribution of Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree***

By Steven Burkeman.

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Today, I want to try to demonstrate just how influential the work of one member of the Rowntree family particular has been in relation to contemporary social policy.

All York's Rowntree stories really start with the journey from Scarborough to York of the famous Joseph Rowntree's father, also Joseph. He arrived in York in 1822 on his 21st birthday, having ridden on the back of a coach with a friend. He bought a shop on **Pavement** in an auction, having first had to dip the auctioneer's head in a bucket of water to sober him up. Today, the building that occupies that site is a **Pizza Hut**. It was over this shop that Joseph junior -- the famous JR -- was born in 1836.

As an adult, Joseph was active on a number of social policy issues. His major concern was to find ways of reducing poverty. In 1863 he produced a statistical study on the links between crime and poverty. Two years later he published a second study, *Pauperism in England and Wales*. Rowntree was a supporter of the Liberal Party. He bought Liberal newspapers in order stop them falling into the hands of supporters of the Conservative Party. He published several books on the subject of alcohol and poverty. He was very critical of the Anglican Church for what he considered to be its lack of interest in dealing with social injustice. He was also in favour of abolishing the House of Lords, an institution that he believed was hampering social progress.

With the perspective of time, we can see that his major *lasting* contribution to social policy was his decision in 1904 to hand over much of his fortune to form **the three trusts** which today still bear his name.

But in his lifetime, Joseph's focus was very much on the City of York. He was not as active on a wider national scale as, say, his nephew **Arnold**, who served as Liberal MP for York from 1910 to 1918, or as his son, Benjamin Seebohm, known as **Seebohm** on whom I want to focus this evening.

Seebohm's influence on social policy was arguably profound and long lasting. In the spring of 1899, aged 28, he launched a survey of the population of working-class households that led to his seminal study, **Poverty – A Study of Town Life**, published in 1901. 100 years later, to mark the centenary of its publication, I arranged for The Policy Press to re-publish it, in an accessible **paperback** format. I commissioned Jonathan Bradshaw, of this University, to write a detailed preface, setting out the background to the study, and describing its impact. In preparing this talk, I've drawn heavily on Jonathan's excellent work, with his blessing – and Jonathan himself clearly drew on the only published biography of Seebohm Rowntree, which is by Asa Briggs. So – who was **Seebohm**?

He was born in 1871, second of the four sons of Joseph Rowntree and Emma Antoinette Rowntree. He was educated by governesses at home, at Bootham School, and at Owen's College, Manchester (where he studied chemistry). At the age of 18 he entered the family business. He became chairman in 1923 and by the time he retired in 1941, the firm 'had established itself as the second largest chocolate and confectionery firm in the United Kingdom ... and the third largest business of its kind in the world'

Like his father, he was interested in statistics, which he put to good effect in the work we will discuss. He believed that a cooperative work-force could be achieved only if each worker had '*a reasonable share with the employer in determining the conditions of work, and an interest in the prosperity of the industry in which he is engaged*' (*Industrial Unrest*, p. 12). This made him suspect in the eyes of many industrialists; recognition of this, combined with a distaste for being in the limelight, made him prefer to work through others rather than as a campaigner.

Though Seebohm remained largely aloof from *local* Quaker concerns, his Quaker convictions remained as a strong influence on his work. Quakers make no distinction between the sacred and the secular and accordingly, treat all political and social questions as moral questions. As well as his contact with the poor in the factory and in the York Adult School, Seebohm was greatly moved by a visit he made to the slums of **Newcastle in 1895**; he wrote "*The sense which remained with me after that night was that there is an overpowering amount of work to be done ... directly religious work, public work and **social work***".

The prevalent attitude to poverty at the time when Seebohm was working on his study was best represented by the Charity Organisation Society, formed in 1869, in reaction to rapid urbanisation and the consequent evident concentrations of poor people in cities. Reams have been written about the COS, but in a nutshell it believed that much poverty was the fault of the poor, and that there was a clear distinction to be drawn between the deserving and the undeserving poor, and thus a clear distinction in the way people in each category should be treated. The COS argued that charity towards the poor was foolish and cruel, and that the poor could only be helped by strengthening those "*influences which make good character, good work and good wages*"

Seebohm was influenced and in contact with **Charles Booth**, who investigated poverty in London, working with a team of investigators which included his cousin Beatrice Webb. This showed that 35% were living in abject poverty. Charles Booth published the first volume of his massive *Life and labour of the people of London* in 1889 and the last (17th) volume appeared two years after Seebohm's *Poverty* study, in 1903. Booth's combination of humanitarianism with a quantitative approach heavily influenced Rowntree **who wrote**:

"Booth's Life and labour made a profound impression on me, as it did upon the public generally in this and other countries, but I thought to myself, 'Well, one knows that there is a great deal of poverty in the East End of London but I wonder whether there is in provincial cities. Why not investigate York?'"

Booth also popularised the idea of a 'poverty line', setting this line at 10 to 20 shillings, which he considered to be the minimum amount necessary for a family of 4 or 5 people to subsist.

So, turning to Seebohm's study, there is much debate about his motivation, but little doubt that one of his main concerns was the efficiency of British workers - thus nutritional efficiency became the key criterion of his poverty standard.

He drew a poverty line in terms of a minimum weekly **sum of money** "*necessary to enable families... to secure the necessities of a healthy life*". The money needed for this subsistence level of existence **covered** fuel and light, rent, food, clothing, and household and personal items, adjusted according to family size. He determined this level using scientific methods which hadn't been applied to the study of poverty before. For example he consulted leading nutritionists of the period to discover the minimum calorific intake and nutritional balance necessary before people got ill or lost weight. He allowed a diet that **represented** 3,478 calories per day for men, 2,923 for women and 2,634 for children. The diet for men was based on that required for moderate physical labour, despite the fact that he acknowledged that most men in his sample were heavy labourers. He also acknowledged that the diets (which excluded any butchers' meat) were less generous than what was supplied in the workhouses. He then surveyed the prices of food in York to discover what the cheapest prices in the area for the food needed for this minimum diet were and used this information to set his poverty line – 21s 8d a week for a family of five (equivalent to approx £75 today).

While later on this approach was criticised (and indeed revised by BSR himself for later work), his example of establishing a diet for nutritional adequacy, if not physical efficiency, still influences budget standards and studies of food poverty today.

The study is based on a **survey** of all the working class households in York -- excluding those individuals who were able to afford to employ a domestic servant. His team – one paid interviewer and a number of parttime volunteers -- visited 11,560 households containing 46,754 people in 388 streets – $\frac{2}{3}$ of York's inhabitants. The interviewers asked questions about rent, the number of residents in each household, access to a water tap, diet and other personal details (information on income was estimated or obtained from employers).

Of those surveyed, just under 10% were in what BSR defined as primary poverty -- "*whose total earnings are insufficient to obtain the minimum necessities of life for mere physical efficiency*". A further 18% were in secondary poverty – their '*total earnings would be sufficient for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency were it not that some portion of it is absorbed by other expenditure, either useful or wasteful*'.

Vitaly, BSR noted that **over half** of those in primary poverty were in regular work, but their wages were too low to maintain a moderate family in a state of physical efficiency. A further 16% were in poverty as the result of the death of the chief wage earner, 5% as the result of illness or old age, 2% unemployment and 22% due to being a large family.

He thus established for the first time that poverty was the result of structural not behavioural factors. Allow me to now to quote directly what Jonathan Bradshaw rightly describes as '***the most evocative...passage in the book***':

*And let us clearly understand what 'merely physical efficiency' means. A family living upon the scale allowed for in this estimate must never spend a penny on railway fare or omnibus. They must never go into the country unless they walk. They must never purchase a halfpenny newspaper or spend a penny to buy a ticket for a popular concert. They must write no letters to absent children, for they cannot afford to **pay the postage**. They must never contribute anything to their church or chapel, or give*

*any help to a neighbour which costs them money. They cannot save, nor can they join sick club or Trade Union, because they cannot pay the necessary subscriptions. The children must have not pocket money for dolls, marbles, or sweets. The fathers must smoke no tobacco, and must drink no beer. The mother must never buy any pretty clothes for herself or **for her children**, the character of the family wardrobe as for the family diet being governed by the regulation, 'Nothing must be bought but that which is absolutely necessary for the maintenance of physical health, and what is bought must be of the plainest and most economical description'. Should a child fall ill, it must be attended by the parish doctor; should it die, it must be buried by the parish. Finally the wage earner must never be absent from his work for a single day.*

While he deals in much less detail with the causes of **secondary poverty** - "Drink, betting and gambling. Ignorant or careless housekeeping, and other improvident expenditure, the latter often induced by irregularity of income" (p 142), he goes on to point out **these 'causes' are**

*...themselves often the outcome of the adverse conditions under which too many of the working classes live. Housed for the most part in sordid streets, frequently under overcrowded and unhealthy condition, compelled very often to earn their bread by monotonous and laborious work, **and unable**, partly through limited education and partly through overtime and other causes of physical exhaustion to enjoy intellectual recreation, what wonder that many of these people fall a ready prey to the publican and the bookmaker? (pp 14+b)*

Rowntree also identified for the first time what we now know as **the cycle** of poverty. "The life of the labourer is marked by five alternating periods of want and comparative plenty" (p 136). People are more likely to be in poverty in childhood, when they are parents with dependent children, when children leave home and marry, and when they are no longer able to work

In Poverty Rowntree makes no policy recommendations, but **he concludes:**

*... the objective of the writer, however, has been to state facts rather than to suggest remedies. He desires, nevertheless, to express his belief that however difficult the path of social progress may be, a way of advance will open out before patient and penetrating thought if inspired by a true human **sympathy**.*

The dark shadow of the Malthusian philosophy has passed away, and no view of the ultimate scheme of things would now be accepted under which multitudes of men and women are doomed by inevitable law to struggle for existence so severe as necessarily to cripple or destroy the higher parts of their nature. (pp 30a-5)

Well, the book had an immediate impact among leading politicians and reformers. The young Winston Churchill bought a copy of the first edition of Poverty, and having read it, wrote to friends urging them **to read it**. "I have lately been reading a book by Mr Rowntree called Poverty which has impressed me very much, and which I strongly recommend you to read.... For my own part, I see little glory in an Empire which can rule the waves and is unable to flush its sewers". He told an audience in Blackpool in **January 1902**, "I have been reading a book which has fairly made my hair stand on end, written by a Mr Rowntree who deals with poverty in the town of York". In 1904 Churchill crossed the floor of the House of Commons and joined the Liberals. He was appointed President of the Board of Trade in 1908, in Asquith's reforming Liberal government.

Lloyd George visited Rowntree in York in 1907, when President of the Board of Trade, and became a close personal friend. Briggs reports that in speeches in 1909 and 1910 Lloyd George waved Poverty at the crowds, although Rowntree teased Lloyd George by suggesting that he had never actually read the book. In 1908, Lloyd George became Chancellor of the Exchequer, appointing Rowntree to a committee concerned with the rating of land, and later, in the First World War, he made him Director of the Welfare Department at the Ministry of Munitions.

In 1902 Samuel Barnett, a respected social reformer of his period, who helped to set up Toynbee Hall in London, **claimed** "*the gain of Booth's and Rowntree's work has been ... a certain modification of public opinion. The facts, disputed or not, are preparing the public mind for reforms and for efforts. Perhaps this is the best result of any work*". As **Jonathan Bradshaw puts it**: *The facts revealed in Poverty finally put the nail in the coffin of the ghastly calculus of the Charity Organisation Society*).

Needless to say it was the COS that led the attack on the results of Poverty when it was published. The dispute was further to be fought out in the arena of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws which included a strong representation from the COS, set against the Fabian **Beatrice Webb**. She was a cousin of Charles Booth and had worked on his surveys. The Webbs had visited Rowntree in York in 1899 while he was working on poverty. Jonathan Bradshaw points out that in her diaries Beatrice Webb (1948) mentions only meeting Rowntree once ("*at a pleasant and useful party*") in 1906, when Rowntree promised to help with the collection of statistics about pauperism. She was a Socialist, Rowntree a Liberal. So Jonathan reckons that it's difficult to be certain how influential Poverty was on the Royal commission. But she had the same commitment to facts and research into the causes and consequences of poverty. The result of all this was the Minority Report (1909), which argued that poverty was not due to personal failing but due to capitalist organisation.

And for the last 60 years, in part thanks to the legacy of Seebohm Rowntree, the tendency in the UK at least has been to blame poverty and not the poor. His Study's findings contributed to the hunger for reform that resulted in the Liberal election victory with a majority of 356 in 1906. Included among the spate of legislation that was directly connected to Rowntree's **concerns were**

- the 1906 Education (Provision of Meals) Act, which among other things, empowered local authorities to provide school meals in elementary schools. This Act also included powers which eventually led to a system of school clinics that were effectively the beginning of a National Health Service.
- the 1907 Workmen's Compensation Act,
- the Labour Exchanges Act of 1908 (implemented by a civil servant called William Beveridge),
- the 1908 Old Age Pensions Act and eventually
- the 1911 National Insurance Act, which provided unemployment and health insurance.

Rowntree became a member of the subcommittee that advised Beveridge about the level of subsistence income which would be used to fix the National Insurance and National Assistance scales. The scales are based on primary poverty rather than human needs - minimum subsistence rather than social adequacy. As Jonathan Bradshaw points out, the

social assistance scheme in Britain today which determines the living standards of one person in eight of the population owes its origins to Rowntree's 1899 poverty standard.

So, in summary, Seebohm's work was amongst the first to take a statistical approach to poverty, moving beyond mere description. As such he influenced the whole shape of research in the field of social science. His work helped to demolish the idea that poverty was the fault of the poor, and influenced Churchill and Lloyd George, whose legislation helped to lay the foundations of the modern welfare state. I think, then, that we can reasonably claim that through him, the north had a very significant impact on social policy. And, by the way, his father's creation of New Earswick, and thus the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust (which gave birth to what is today called the Joseph Rowntree Foundation), was itself in part a response to Seebohm's work, which brings us to today.

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Note: this talk was followed by one by Julia Unwin, Chief Executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, about the contemporary work of the Foundation aimed at influencing social policy.