Moral Capital*

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Abstract — Foucault’s innovative and influential explorations of sexual and moral regulation did not sufficiently explore the connections or contradictions between moral regulation and economic processes. This paper draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s materialist concept of “cultural capital” in the elaboration of a model for the study of moral regulation based on the concept of “moral capital”. The accumulation of moral capital, it is argued here, mimics that of economic capital, and yet it also acts as an external limit to economic capital accumulation. This dialectical model is both elaborated and tested through a historical overview of philanthropic techniques for the moral regulation of the urban poor.

Résumé — Les importantes et novatrices études de Foucault sur la réglementation de la sexualité et de la moralité ne se sont pas suffisamment penchées sur les liens ou les contradictions qui existent entre la réglementation de la moralité et les processus économiques. Cet article s’inspire du concept matérialiste de «capital culturel» introduit par Pierre Bourdieu dans l’élaboration d’un modèle pour l’étude de la réglementation de la moralité, basé sur le concept de «capital moral». L’auteure soutient que l’accumulation du capital moral est similaire à l’accumulation du capital économique, quoique la première s’avère également une limite externe à la seconde. C’est par le biais d’un survol historique des techniques philanthropiques utilisées pour réglementer la moralité des pauvres en milieu urbain que ce modèle dialectique est élaboré et testé.

What concepts and frameworks can be used to analyze the formation, reproduction and disruption of moral/ethical subjectivities? And what are the connections, parallels or contradictions linking moral regulation and other social, political and economic processes?

These questions, opened up in recent years largely through Foucault’s work, have by no means received adequate answers. Foucault’s analysis of biopolitics provided an extremely powerful, original way of understanding the importance of

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both bodies and "souls" for modern forms of social power: innovative concepts such as "discipline", "technologies of the self", and "the deployment of sexuality" have enabled scholars to move beyond the twin pillars of Marxism and psychoanalysis in the historical study of modes of sexual and moral regulation. The relationship between moral regulation and other dimensions of social regulation, however, remains obscure. In earlier works Foucault sometimes provided—often by way of analogies or offhand remarks more than in any systematic exposition—explanations linking the emergence of modern forms of moral power to capital's needs for "labour power". In *Discipline and Punish* we are told that discipline is the mechanism that creates the labour power that capital then exploits:

... it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an "aptitude", a "capacity", which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection. If economic exploitation separates the force and the product of labour, let us say that disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination.2

In his later work, however, Foucault steers clear of arguments friendly to Marxism. He admits, for instance, that the hierarchical social relations of slavery shaped ancient Greek sexual ethics, or at least set certain parameters for both individual ethics and moral regulation. But the thoughts presented in *Discipline and Punish* about the possible links, or at least parallels, between forms of moral regulation and economic forms typical of capitalism have never been well developed, either by Foucault or by his followers. The recent resurgence of conservative or anti-political ideas about the centrality of moral regulation—what one might call the rise of neo-Durkheimianism—highlights the need to clearly specify how work on

1. Foucault does not use the phrase "moral regulation"; it has been developed by others working loosely within his framework, most notably P. Corrigan & D. Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979).
5. A good example of a former leftist now pursuing what I'm calling neo-Durkheimianism is D. Garland, in his recent work *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990).
moral regulation, without reverting to the functionalisms so definitely refuted by Foucault, can nevertheless challenge capitalism, now more than ever globally hegemonic.

In this task, I believe we can find some guidance in Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural capital”, from which I have derived the concept of moral capital. The work of agencies of moral regulation—schools, welfare agencies, charities—in capitalist societies, I will argue in this article, can be usefully conceptualized as oriented to the maximization of both the individual moral capital of the recipients and the aggregate moral capital of the nation-state. A couple of comments on cultural capital are in order, however, before we proceed with the theoretical and historical analysis of moral capital.

In his landmark work, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, Pierre Bourdieu explored the dynamics of the primitive accumulation, investment and transformation of what he called “cultural capital”. Through a large-scale quantitative study of the minute but significant differences in cultural tastes and consumption among various occupational, class and status groups, Bourdieu provides a total picture of the French class system which takes into account the relative predominance of economic versus cultural assets in each group’s total capital (schoolteachers, for instance, rank low on their ability to control means of economic production, but they have quite a bit of cultural capital). Bourdieu’s framework, while solidly materialist, suggests that economic production is not the only social site upon which classes are formed (something which has also been explored, for very different purposes, in feminist analyses of domestic and reproductive labour in capitalist societies). I will here argue in a similar vein that the study of moral regulation and the formation of ethical identities does not preclude, and may in fact complement and revise, the critical study of capitalist social formations.

6. For Canadian historical sociology showing, from a left Foucaultian perspective, how the education system contributed to generating the subjective resources necessary for the rise of industrial capitalism, see B. Curtis, Building the Educational State (Sussex: Althouse Press, 1988); K. Dehli, “Health Scouts’ for the State: School and Public Health Nurses in Early Twentieth-Century Toronto” (1990) 2:2 Historical Studies in Education 247.


8. A similar aim moves Corrigan & Sayer, supra note 1, in that they ground the central process studied, moral regulation, in English/British liberal state formation. This, however, while helping to avoid a transhistorical concept of moral regulation, makes invisible agencies of moral regulation outside the state (charities, professional bodies, etc.) The account presented here owes a great deal to Corrigan and Sayer, but seeks to develop the theorization of moral regulation by using a “society-centred” rather than a “state-centric” approach.
One characteristic of cultural capital relevant to a theory of moral capital is that, while the circuit of economic capital is notoriously unpredictable, cultural tastes rise and fall in value at a much more sedate pace. Key to the greater stability of cultural capital is that it is not made up of tangible commodities; rather, the books or paintings one owns are merely material tokens of a “habitus”, a style, a set of desires, which is the true capital. One can be too poor to go to the opera but derive comfort (and status) from knowing opera: cultural capital thus helps the educated elites to compensate for the notorious vagaries of the economic marketplace.

A habitus, like the social and sexual identities analyzed by Foucault, is the product of regulatory processes, but this production process is often invisible to the individuals concerned: they imagine that they are born with innate good taste. While Bourdieu’s interest is in unmasking the social process creating, certifying and maximizing forms of cultural capital, my interest lies in the parallel process by which certain moral dispositions and “habits” are constituted and naturalized.

The aim of moral reform in a moral-capitalist setting, I will argue, is not so much to change behaviour as to generate certain ethical subjectivities that appear as inherently “moral”. Correct actions will of course follow; but the subjectivity is more important than the behaviour, as it is in the realm of cultural capital.

In addition, just as cultural capital usually requires certification by academic or artistic authorities, moral capital requires a similar certification process. At one time official churches had a quasi-monopoly on the certification of moral capital, but today a variety of professional groups are involved in this. Many people believe that we now live in a post-moralistic era, but a case could be made that moral regulation has simply become more secular and formalistic. The practice of writing letters of reference, for example, could be analyzed as a form of moral regulation, insofar as such letters, contemporary versions of the 19th-century “character” required of servants, act to certify the general moral status of the people in question, not just narrowly professional accomplishments. The term “moral” is hence used here not in the narrow religious sense, but in a broader sense.

The Circuit of Moral Capital

Despite the high status conferred on those possessing and certifying cultural capital, particularly in continental Europe, the middle classes have been simultaneously fearful of excesses of culture. The mad genius, the degenerate artist and the immoral intellectual are, in bourgeois European cultures, recurring symbols of what can go wrong when the accumulation of intellectual/cultural capital runs amok.9

9. For a parallel between fin-de-siècle fears about artists and moral degeneration and similar contemporary fears, see E. Showalter, Sexual Anarchy (New York: Viking, 1990).
Now, how can one have "too much culture"? There is nothing in the logic of cultural capital to suggest that any one person can ever acquire too much culture: one of bourgeois society's most cherished myths is that both truth and good taste are perpetually receding ideals, and that the acquisition of culture is a constant striving. There is also nothing in the relationship of economic to cultural capital to set any necessary limits on the acquisition of cultural capital by those with economic capital.

The judgement that some people have too much cultural capital and have therefore become "effete" or degenerate can only be made from a standpoint outside both the economic and the cultural. This is the standpoint of morality, grounded in what I shall call the circuit of moral capital. The immoral artist or intellectual (represented a century ago by Oscar Wilde or Nietzsche, and today by Robert Mapplethorpe and Foucault) contravenes no laws of motion other than those of moral capital. If the overly cultured risk falling into immorality, so do the overly rich. Victorian fantasies about aristocratic brothels and contemporary accounts of the leisure-time habits of the Kennedy family both point to a middle-class view, turned into "common sense" by the combined action of Christianity and popular culture, to the effect that those who have too much wealth (especially if unearned) are morally suspect. Since it is the essence of capital to expand indefinitely, the perception of "excess" can only be made from outside the logic of capital, from a location in the circuit of moral capital. The relationship between morality and the other two types of capital accumulation thus produces a kind of Aristotelian warning against excess, an emphasis on balance and moderation that continually undermines the infinite-accumulation dynamic of both economic and cultural capital.

The view that the morally debilitating effects of static wealth need to be counteracted by the bracing effects of hard work, deferred gratification, and investment, probably dates back to the Protestant Reformation, as does the twin...
view that extreme poverty is a reliable indicator of vice. This idea about the relationship between economic and moral capital, central to middle-class philanthropy, was developed in Britain in the second half of the 18th century and achieved its greatest triumph in the late 19th century, but continues to be popular into our own days. Moral regulation, which I argue is not a "cover" for economic power but is a distinct mode of regulation, is alive and well today. It is now more likely to use the language of biomedical science or of social work than the narratives of evangelism or Victorian melodrama: but it remains moral, in the sense of being aimed at the production of individual ethical subjectivity and the reproduction of the nation's moral capital.

Is moral capital, that intangible resource known as "character", simply an ideological result or precondition of economic capital accumulation? The idea of the "relative autonomy" of the cultural has been adopted by both neo-Marxists and anti-Marxists, and more recently there have been discussions of the relative autonomy of the moral sphere. But, in the moral as well as in the cultural sphere, relative autonomy is more easily advocated than defined. My own view is that there are no universal answers to such abstract questions, for although the circuit of economic capital in many ways provides the fundamental paradigm for all social processes under capitalism, Max Weber's insights about the relative autonomy of the moral can still be quite useful in concrete historical and sociological analysis (as long as they are not used, as they often are, as sticks to beat Marx with). But perhaps the old unsolved questions about the relative importance of "base" and "superstructure" can be circumvented if we simply abandon the architectural metaphor which gave rise to the dilemma in the first place. If we cease imagining social relations as fixed and solid and building-like, and think of them in more fluid terms, then primacy is not so much of an issue.

Civil society can usefully be envisioned as constituted through the interaction of three circuits: economic, cultural, and moral. These in turn are not separate from the relations of power originating in and sustaining the state; as John Keane and others have pointed out, the separation of civil society from the state is often more rhetorical than real.12 For the purposes of administering people, private and public institutions often cooperate in the social equivalent of a "mixed economy". Of course, one could well extend the present model into the sphere of the state in order to argue that the workings of both government and other state institutions

12. J. Keane, Democracy and Civil Society (London: Verso, 1988). Keane does not argue that there can ever be an abolition of the distinction between civil society and the state; in fact, he is highly critical of orthodox Marxism for imagining that the distinction is merely a capitalist one. What he does argue is that civil society and the state are not antagonistic or even external to each other. A very different theorization sharing some common concerns is found in N. Rose, "Beyond the Public/Private Division: Law, Power and the Family" (1987) 14:1 Journal of Law and Society 61.
can be theorized as processes for the accumulation of political capital; but here we shall only consider the state and governmental action insofar as they are involved in constituting and regulating civil society, and will leave the analysis of political capital for another occasion.

This three-circuit model of civil society has the advantage of avoiding positing quasi-geographical separate “realms” or “spheres” (“the public” versus “the private”, “the family” versus “the market”). The term “circuit” is employed here precisely as a metaphor bringing into view the dynamism of social processes. The circuits are not located in distinct social sites, but are rather fluid-like processes taking place throughout the social.

In trying to specify the dynamics of various circuits, one could begin by arguing that even the circuit of economic capital is not aimed at producing tangible commodities but rather (as Marx pointed out) increasingly rarified, even “spiritual” forms of value. Modern capital divorced itself from the mercantilist crass concern for piles of gold and numbers of people, just as Protestant inwardness replaced the Catholic emphasis on the material mediations of religious value. In our own day, much as other Marxian predictions have failed to come true, it is indisputable that capital has become virtually intangible, abstract, and extra-local. But it is in the cultural and moral circuits that the process of “spiritualization” or abstraction is most complete. Bourdieu’s analysis shows that the endpoint and final cause of the circuit of cultural capital is not an amount of commodities but rather an intangible and continually self-reproducing capital embodied in the soul: the cultured personality, reflected in one’s goods and one’s actions but not exhausted by them. Similarly, as Foucault so eloquently argued (following, perhaps unwittingly, Luther’s emphasis on faith as opposed to “good works”), being

13. The economic characteristics of capital, in Marx’s view, lead to the pernicious social consequence that what is abstract (money, for instance) is perceived as more concrete than actual things. In times of crisis, he writes, money becomes the “sumnum bonum”; “compared with it all other commodities—just because they are use values—appear to be useless, mere baubles and toys, or as our Dr. Martin Luther says, mere ornament and gluttony.” See K. Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress, 1970, orig. 1857) at 146. The same point is made in the discussion of “modern” credit systems: “The monetary system is essentially a Catholic institution, the credit system essentially Protestant, ‘The Scotch hate gold’ ... It is Faith [not Catholic good works] that brings salvation. Faith in money-value and the immanent spirit of commodities, faith in the mode of production and its predestined order, faith in the individual agents of production...” K. Marx, *Capital* (New York: International, 1967) vol. 3 at 592.

moral is not so much a set of visible actions as the cultivation of a particular subjectivity requiring constant self-supervision.  

Clearly, then, the dynamics of all three circuits resemble each other. Marx would of course say this is because the circuit of capital is the basis and model for all other social processes, something which Foucault denies (or refuses to address). I take the view that it is not necessary, and may even be harmful, to develop a general theory of the relation between the economy in general, culture in general, and morality in general, since this may blind us to the ways in which the three circuits interact in specific situations. What I would like to study are not hypothetical general structures but rather the constant struggles in civil society to "fix" certain events within the discourse of a particular circuit. The persistence of these struggles suggests that social processes do not "naturally" fall into one of three separate categories which are statically linked in a hierarchical system. If, say, Sunday shopping were "really" a labour issue, or "really" an issue of morality and family life, or "really" an issue of the freedom of capital, Protestant cultures would not have been struggling with its regulation for a long century. The history of social regulation shows social actors constantly involved in jurisdictional disputes not just over specific regulations but, more radically, over the prior categorization of the social that is the precondition of any particular regulation.

In these disputes to categorize the social, certain collective or institutional actors make regular appearances. While economics as a collective actor provides an analysis of any and all social processes as if they were economic, the collective actor which, since the rise of capitalism, has been key in attempting to define any and all social processes as moral has been philanthropy. Philanthropy is here defined not as proto-welfare but rather as a set of practices, which take place within State welfare agencies as well as in private charities, aimed at restoring and maximizing the moral capital of the urban poor in capitalist countries. This process sometimes involves providing small amounts of both economic and cultural capital (e.g. buying tools for workers, providing free classes), but these are generally means to the aim of re-moralization.

Philanthropy, as has often been pointed out, saw itself as scientific, by opposition to old-fashioned, non-scientific charity. While charity-givers expect a return for their alms from God, and the value of this exchange of money for spiritual goods is realized instantly, philanthropy resembles a capitalist investment more than a simple commodity exchange. As Max Weber said, the idea of gain is quite transhistorical, but the idea of profit is specifically capitalist: similarly, all forms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0829320100003574
of charity seek moral gain, but only philanthropy seeks moral profit over the long run. Although earning points in Heaven may still motivate the modern philanthropist, he/she tries to ensure an earthly result which, like the return on economic capital, is necessarily risky and delayed. Organized charities are incorporated precisely to minimize and evenly distribute the risk that is an inherent element in moral as well as economic investment. The investment of both money and the philanthropist's own moral capital is supposed to generate a moral profit, an idea foreign to alms-giving. While the charity giver does not care whether the beggar uses the money "wisely" or not, for giving is good in itself and the beggar will square his/her own accounts with God, the philanthropist is obsessed with getting social and moral returns. Aid—increasingly taking the form of services or advice rather than money—is now supposed to "moralize" the poor, to make them thrifty, clean, hard-working and sober. This subjective transformation is portrayed as owing to the philanthropist personally; philanthropists' reports often reveal profound disappointment when the delayed exchange does not realize the right kind and amount of moral profit. The currency with which the poor pay back what they have received is that elusive inward essence, "character" (also known as "moral fibre").

A quick phenomenological experiment bears out the depth and breadth of morally capitalist values: most of us today have internalized the moral-capitalist ethic so well that we feel guilty if, in a fit of old-fashioned charity, we give a beggar a few coins. Moral capitalism demands that we give only to well administered corporate bodies that, as the saying goes, helps only those who help themselves. We feel we have a duty to ensure that the money we give purchases not a coffee or a bottle of wine but rather moral commodities such as independence or good character.

Philanthropy models itself on capitalist production, but it is not always subordinate to it, having historically acted as a check on the most inhumane tendencies of capitalism. It is a tribute to its influence that bourgeois states, even the most classically liberal ones, have at times agreed that the need to produce and reproduce moral capital takes precedence over the needs of "real" capital: for instance, child labour was banned in Britain in the 1830s and 1840s, and until recently, women in many countries were banned from night-work and many "dirty" jobs for philanthropic reasons, despite their lower cost to employers.

But while philanthropy can act as an external limit on the accumulation of economic capital, it is itself shaped by extra-moral considerations to varying degrees. As Donna Andrew’s study of 18th-century charities shows, during the major imperial wars Lying-In and Foundling hospitals were set up to boost the

18. One of the few turn-of-the-century social reformers to question this idea of the poor's debt to philanthropists was Jane Addams, who argued that the purpose of social/moral reform was not moral regeneration as much as a healthier democracy. J. Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1905).
population (not to reform their “clients”); but after the Malthusian revolution, saving poor people’s babies became unpopular and gave way to the more “modern” concern with the quality, not the number, of the poor.19 Thus, changes in philanthropic practice reflect and are to a certain extent shaped by, extra-moral considerations—in Andrew’s study, political economy’s shifting evaluation of the value of “mere” human life. Furthermore, philanthropy may have interfered with free enterprise in the case of child-labour laws, but the philanthropists in question were usually organized in what were known as “joint-stock” charities, with boards of directors and procedures modelled on those of emerging capitalist enterprises.

The investment/return imperative was applied to both the finances of the agencies and the “moral results” being sought: traditional charities that gave money or goods without ensuring some kind of return from the poor in moral currency were perceived as unprofitable in all senses of the word—and thus as somehow immoral.20 Modern philanthropy was and is based on a consensus about the inability of economics and culture to alone maintain the social and moral fabric of bourgeois society, together with a rejection of the old idea that poverty was a divinely ordained condition enabling the wealthy to exercise charity. Put in positive terms, philanthropy is based on the felt need for specific institutions and regulations ensuring the continued reproduction of the nation’s moral capital.

The Early 19th Century: The Crisis in the Accumulation of Moral Capital and the Rise of Philanthropy

As Jacques Donzelot and other Foucaultian historians have pointed out, European cities in the period after the Napoleonic wars witnessed the rise of a number of phenomena collected under the umbrella term “la question sociale”.21 In France


20. Andrew points out that while in the early 18th century, bequests were the most common form of donation, by the 19th century many philanthropists, even those very active in particular agencies, left them no money in their wills, preferring to exercise more control over their investment by means of annual subscriptions and involvement in the boards and committees (see Andrew, supra note 19 at c. 2). A century later, scientific philanthropists bemoaned the existence of endowed charities precisely because they lacked flexibility and gave the poor too much security; they preferred to be constantly evaluating and changing their investments.

and in England, political economy was criticized from the new perspective of "social science", in France sometimes known as "économie sociale". Social science promised to provide a more human-centred view of social processes than classical political economy: it aimed to integrate moral considerations into economic rationality. At the theoretical level, social science counterposed its more holistic views to the narrow wealth-oriented perspectives of political economy; at the level of practice, social science was often coterminous with the replacement of market economics by a more moral system such as socialism. Louis Blanc, the most famous socialist of the 1848 generation, defined "socialism" using the philanthropic trope of a "point of view" outside of, and acting as, limit to the circuit of economic capital:

[À] la différence de l'économie politique, qui est la science de la formation des richesses, mais qui n'est que cela, et qui décrit le mécanisme de la production, sans égard à son influence sur la condition des producteurs, le socialisme a pour objet d'étudier la constitution économique de la société en se plaçant au point de vue de l'amélioration intellectuelle, morale et physique de la classe la plus nombreuse et la plus pauvre.22

The main object for social economy was not wealth but rather "the poor", or more specifically the theoretical object named "misère" or "paupérisme". The social economists ranged from conservative critics of political economy's free market (Villeneuve-Bargemont, Eugène Buret, some English Romantics) to socialists like Blanc and his friend François Vidal, who wrote a major manifesto of social economy in 1846, proclaiming the "death" of political economy. In this work, Vidal argues that political economy is only interested in the accumulation of wealth, and should therefore be subordinated to "économie sociale" or "philosophie sociale", studying moral needs and demands.23 This focus on the moral was not necessarily indicative of a failure of theoretical nerve, as "scientific socialists" have claimed since Marx: it was rather a considered effort to theorize the specifically moral effects of capitalism and industrialism.

The Australian historical sociologist Mitchell Dean has recently taken this argument even further, showing that right in the heart of classical liberalism lies a profound concern for the moral/social preconditions of the accumulation of economic capital and the reproduction of wage labour.24 Malthus' catastrophic economics presupposed and legitimized an absolute moral code in which male breadwinners made all the economic and reproductive decisions within the working class (indeed it was their monopoly over such decisions that constituted them as

24 . Dean, supra note 4.
breadwinners). Similarly, post-Malthusian liberalism, Dean argues, ought not to be seen as "laissez-faire", as non-regulation, but rather as a very specific system of moral and economic regulation, a system in which both the pauper and the "honest" wage labourer were constituted through moral categories. The male breadwinner, the chaste and economically dependent wife, the disciplined young male worker ... these and other social identities made up the moral capital of the poor, a capital whose reproduction was perceived as happening "naturally" in good conditions but as requiring philanthropic intervention in times of crisis.

The prime object of the new sciences of the social was pauperism or "misère", theorized as a historical break from previous forms of scarcity. "Poverty" denotes an inability to satisfy certain economic needs, the social economists argued, but misery or pauperism is the subspecies of poverty involving moral degradation.

Blanc wrote: "La misère conseille incessamment le sacrifice de la dignité personnelle, et presque toujours la commande. La misère crée une dépendance de condition ..." And the earlier social economist Eugène Buret (whose 1840 magnum opus was heavily referenced in Marx’s 1844 manuscripts), wrote that while savages may be poor because they lack economic resources, only civilized peoples can be miserable (or pauperized, as the English would say): "La misère est un phénomène de la civilisation: ... la misère, c’est la pauvreté moralement sentie."

English observers, from conservative philanthropists to Frederick Engels, also agreed that lack of money was not the basic problem. The new poor, the urban poor of industrial capitalism, had become dehumanized by losing their morality: they had become a new/old race of barbarians threatening to destroy not just themselves but the combined moral and cultural capital of European civilization.

Moralizing remedies, ranging from "moral architecture" and new sewers all the way to a socialist revolution, were advocated in order to re-moralize the urban miseries. In Britain, the first efforts toward housing reform, public health and urban planning were made in the 1840s from this moralizing perspective. The vast 19th-century literature on urban hygiene used as a constant refrain the idea that dirtiness produced vice and immorality as surely as rotten garbage produced disease, and for the Victorians the moral decay was as visible as its physical counterpart.

25 . L. Blanc, supra note 22 at 4.
27 . The classic study of middle-class fear of the "new barbarians" in the 1830s and 1840s is still L. Chevalier, Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses à Paris pendant la première moitié du XIXe siècle (Paris: Plon, 1958).
In the late Victorian period, there was a re-discovery of pauperism. The most detailed and influential study of urban poverty at the turn of the century, Charles Booth’s *Life and Labour of the People of London*, used the following list of “causes of pauperism” to categorize its massive quantitative data: “Crime, vice, drink, laziness, pauper association, heredity, mental disease, temper (queer), incapacity, early marriage, large family, extravagance, lack of work, trade misfortune, restlessness ... sickness, accident, ill luck, old age.” Economic factors were acknowledged, but only as relatively minor factors in a sea of moral causes.

The standpoint of moral capital is similarly evident on almost every page of an influential set of articles published from 1866 to 1872 and collected in 1883: Octavia Hill’s *Homes of the London Poor*. Hill depicts herself exercising a moralizing influence on each and every one of the tenants under her management—she was a rent collector cum social worker for several blocks of “model” tenements—and claims that practical experience shows that what the poor need is not more money (she thought the *Poor Law* was often far too generous) but moralization. When she states that her key aim is not to help the poor but to “develop the resources of the poor themselves”, what she means is their moral resources: the duty of charity workers is to “raise” the poor “to be energetic, self-reliant, provident and industrious”. The moral impetus behind late Victorian housing reform is also visible in the way that poor people’s housing became a major political concern only after the publication of the much-read 1883 exposé *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*. This pamphlet, and particularly its prim and yet salacious allusion to the commonness of incest, was widely credited with motivating the 1884–1885 Royal Commission on the Housing of the Urban Poor.

As historians have pointed out, scientific philanthropy in the late Victorian period was primarily concerned with building “character” among the poor. The
desire to maximize opportunities for building character and to ensure a return for the philanthropist’s moral capital led to the accepted view that the “drunken and idle people should be offered the workhouse only”,35 while those meriting investment were subjected to a time-consuming but ultimately rewarding process of investigation and habit reform. As Hill says, in a description evoking the Foucaultian understanding of power but also echoing the capitalist manager’s day-to-day work:

For the work is one of detail. Looking back over the years as they pass, one sees a progress that is not small; but day after day the work is one of such small things, that if one did not look beyond and through them they would be trying—locks to be mended, notices to be served, the missing shillings of the week’s rent to be called for three or four times, petty quarrels to be settled, small rebukes to be spoken, the same remonstrances to be made again and again.

But it is on these things and their faithful execution that the life of the whole matter depends, and by which steady progress is ensured.36

Attempting to reconcile the circuits of moral and economic capital, Octavia Hill built her fame on managing housing blocks built by philanthropists not as charity but as an admittedly low-profit business.37 Denouncing the new municipal partly subsidized housing for failing to moralize the tenants, she argued that low-cost housing could be run “on a thoroughly sound commercial principle”,38 though she uneasily admitted that clearing condemned houses and hygiene hazards would have to be done out of public funds because there was no economic profit in it.

Hill saw clearly that if philanthropy were only concerned to alleviate poverty it would undertake large-scale, impersonal measures; but since its object was the maximization of moral capital, and moral capital is necessarily composed of habits embodied in individuals, then those who would manage moral capital have to individualize as they manage. One of the basic principles of a key institution to which Hill belonged, the Charity Organization Society (COS), was “that if the poor are to be raised to a permanently better condition, they must be dealt with as individuals and by individuals...”39 The phrase “as individuals” has been sufficiently theorized in Foucault’s analysis of discipline or modern power; but the second phrase, “by individuals”, refers to the less remarked upon process by which philanthropists invested their personal moral capital in their work. As they

35. Supra note 31 at 74.
36. Ibid. at 52.
38. Ibid. at 7.
39. Supra note 31 at 56.
shaped the individual subjectivity of the poor, they too exercised and confirmed their individual moral identity through their “work of detail”, expecting a return from the people then known as objects and now known as clients.

In Hill’s case, the return took the mixed moral/economic form of on-time rents and clean, respectable homes. These tokens of successful reform were perceived as owing not so much to the tenement owners but to her personally: the “first” principle with which to “rule these people”, she writes, is “to demand a strict fulfilment of their duties to me—one of the chief of which would be the punctual payment of rent”. Since she did not own the houses, it is clear that she was holding the tenants accountable for a moral debt to her as much as an economic debt to the landlords.

Hill was, of course, on the right wing of the late Victorian social reform movement. She and her colleagues at the Charity Organization Society were classic liberals: they had an absolute faith in self-regulating economic and moral markets which was not shaken by their recognition of the dire need for both philanthropic and state intervention. They attempted to circumvent this regulatory dilemma by arguing that, as long as most intervention was voluntary and short-term, and involved lots of advice but very little if any money, the mythical “independence” of the poor was not being undermined. Universal entitlement, even to a plank bed in the workhouse, was perceived as undermining the circuit of moral capital because the paupers checked out of the house whenever they wanted, without any thought of repayment. The inmates of workhouses did not acquire a moral debt to the guardians, and therefore any efforts made by the authorities (locks mended, shillings collected, etc.) were for nought, morally speaking.

Hill’s views regarding the accumulation of moral capital among the underclasses, however, were shared by many in liberal and labour circles, who disagreed with her on the division of moralizing work between philanthropy and expert state agencies but who also defined pauperism as a moral condition. This can best be seen by a brief consideration of the role of moralization in the proposals about the social regulation of the poor put forward by the influential team of Beatrice and Sidney Webb. In their work the term “pauperism” was purposively avoided; this was because the British Poor Law created a legal category of paupers, and one of the Webb’s key projects was to abolish legal pauperism and “break up the Poor Law”. But the term they used instead, “destitution”, denoted not an economic

40. Ibid. at 41.

41. The convolutions made by poor law guardians, especially masters of workhouses, in order to incorporate a “test” element into the administration of a poor law that also acknowledged a universal entitlement to not starve, are well described (though not analyzed) in the massive reports and studies of the 1909 Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, about which more below.
status but rather “mental degradation” or “moral malaria”. While condemning many of their immediate enemies, notably the Charity Organization Society, for imposing moralistic criteria on the operations of public and private relief, the Webbs nevertheless retained a strong sense of the need to maximize moral capital. For instance, they decried the Salvation Army’s non-investigative charity practices as leading to “de-moralisation” because the Army’s soup kitchens and shelters did not exact any behavioural or attitudinal payment, and thus were not morally capitalistic even though they were explicitly moralizing. They went so far as to oppose universal old age pensions (thus missing the historical boat of Lloyd George’s pension and insurance schemes) because unconditionally given payments, whether contributory or not, would inevitably lead to the “insidious deterioration of personal character” and to “slowly spreading habits of malingering”. They favoured the introduction of a “national minimum”, but insisted that the state ought to expect a return on its investment of moral capital.

The rhetoric about a return on investment did not mean that relief was at bottom an economic measure geared to producing more efficient workers through health and welfare measures. The proposals for children’s medical care might be construed as long-term investments in human capital or labour power, but no economic explanation accounts for the demands the Webbs (Beatrice in particular) wanted to place on the elderly and on full-time mothers. Pensions should only be granted to “the destitute aged who live decent lives”; this went against Lloyd George’s non-moralistic pension plan but was in agreement with the view of the Charity Organization Society (COS) that even old age pensions should be reserved for those who live “respectable lives in decent houses”.

The COS, represented by Octavia Hill and other members of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws of 1905–1909, presented a diagnosis of “the problem” that differed from the Fabian/Webb perspective a great deal less than one would think from Beatrice’s partisan account of her machinations as a Royal

43. Ibid, at 239.
44. Ibid, at 39.
45. This is J. Donzelot’s interpretation, in his influential work on philanthropy and social policy The Policing of Families, supra note 16. The late-19th-century shift in interest from old people to children is taken to be a rational economic measure, insofar as children represent future economic values and old people do not; while this is true it does not prove that separate moral considerations were not at work.
46. The Webb statement on pensions is from their jointly written “Minority Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws”, on which Beatrice sat (alongside her rival Octavia Hill and other COS representatives), U.K. (H.C. Parliamentary Papers (1909) vol. 37, 941, henceforth “Minority Report”). The phrase “respectable lives in decent houses” is found throughout the Majority Report’s very lengthy discussion of the conditions of outdoor relief.
Commissioner. (She was, with Sidney, responsible for the Commission’s Minority Report, heralded by many as a blueprint for the post-1945 welfare state). The problem of pauperism or destitution was partly economic, it was agreed, with the precise role of structural economic factors remaining a major bone of contention between the two sides. But all agreed that, fundamentally, pauperism was caused by the fact that the circuits of moral capital were not functioning smoothly, and that in large parts of urban England “normal” socialization processes were failing to reproduce moral capital both individually and in the aggregate.

In their recommendations, the two sides presented different views of what needed to be done in order to reestablish the circuits of moral capital. The COS assigned a much larger role to private initiative in the circuit of moral capital, in keeping with their myth of self-regulating marketplaces. The Webbs, by contrast, believed that most types of moralization should be accomplished by state agencies, specifically local education and public health authorities, with occasional back-up by private religious agencies specializing in the moral reform of the vicious. Their critique of classic liberal modes of regulation has often been regarded simply as a socialist call for more and better social services. This is inaccurate: if they wanted to replace the frankly punitive but non-compulsory Poor Law of 1834 by the gaze of public health inspectors and school attendance officials, this was not necessarily because they trusted the poor and wanted to treat them benevolently. On the contrary: the problem with the Poor Law, they state, is that it does not exercise enough surveillance. In the context of arguing for universal maternal and child health care, they put forward a model of social regulation that echoes Bentham’s panopticon as well as the worst dystopias of scientific management:

What is needed [...] is continuous observation of the household both before and after birth. The Destitution Authority, by the very nature of its work, has, and can have, no such continuity of knowledge. The Local Health Authority, on the other hand is—by its ubiquitous machinery of health visitors, and house to house visitations—continuously observing the circumstances of the household, irrespective of temporary destitution. By its staff of Sanitary Inspectors it knows the character of the street, and even of the house, in which the expectant mother is living [...]


48. The Minority Report “became part of a Socialist charter ... Nearly forty years after its first publication, the first Labour government with a clear majority in the House of Commons was to make it the basis for the ‘Welfare state’ legislation of the late 1940s.” See K. Jones, The Making of Social Policy in Britain (London: Athlone, 1991) at 94.

49. Supra note 46 at 816. Emphasis in original.
The regulation of motherhood through continuous surveillance is supposed to ensure that the work of mothering—the reproduction of the physical and moral capital of the working class—is properly done. The implication is that without expert supervision it would not be properly done.

Throughout their much-vaunted Minority Report, the Webbs agreed with right-wing philanthropists that the aim of both charity and social welfare was not to supplant but rather to foster the independence and moral autonomy of the family unit. Aid to the poor should be seen to produce a mysterious moral quality known as “a sense of personal responsibility” or “an increased feeling of personal obligation”—all different ways of naming that elusive essence, “character”. The “character” produced by the “continuous” surveillance of sanitary inspectors and other expert officials was the currency with which the poor paid back for what they had received by way of services or monetary payments, though the Webbs put less stress than the COS on the personal moral investment of philanthropists and more emphasis on the corporate moral investment of the state. The specific content of “character” varied by age, gender, and personal situation: mothers had character if they looked properly after their children, male adults had character if they provided for dependents, old people had character if they refrained from drinking and led orderly, thrifty lives. But the imperative to return, in moral currency, the investment that charity or the state had initially made, was universal.

Where the Webbs differed from classic liberalism and contributed to laying the basis of social-democratic social policy was in their perception that both economic and moral “private” spheres needed a permanent regulatory structure. COS publications, among which one could include the Majority Report of the Poor Law Commission, were crammed with anecdotes illustrating how particular poor families benefited from wise philanthropic investment and became independent, a stylistic choice fostering the illusion that the moral economy could be self-regulating. (This parallels the liberal myth that state regulation of the economy is short-term and is only designed to return the market to its “natural” state). By contrast, the Webbs—and the Fabians as a whole—eschew tales of family regeneration in favour of technocratic descriptions of efficiently functioning state organizations. For the Fabians, as for social democrats generally, continuous surveillance and permanent regulation are necessary, not contingent, features of social regulation under capitalist conditions. Just as the Webbs recognized that

50. *Ibid.* at 815, 905. This is repeated at 846, in the section on social welfare for school-age children, which praises the “constant supervision of unfit parents” as a means not to undermine parenting but “to induce them [poor parents] to continuously fulfil their parental responsibilities”.

51. The Webbs’ obliviousness to popular culture was more than just a personal prejudice; as Sally Alexander has pointed out, it was indicative of the Fabian Society’s lack of popular base. See S. Alexander, ed., *Women’s Fabian Tracts* (London: Routledge, 1988) introduction.
economic marketplace required permanent regulation, and thus proposed national labour exchanges, a pro-active Ministry of Labour, and a permanent system of public works, so too the moral dimension of capitalist society was envisioned as requiring permanent systems for the surveillance of the poor and the constant production of "character". The poor family, headed by that flawed creature usually referred to by Beatrice Webb as "the average sensual man", would not achieve moral independence even after philanthropic intervention. Moral capital was, for Webb, chronically scarce, and vast bureaucracies were required in order to ensure its reproduction in the aggregate.

Current Regulatory Dilemmas

Although the bulk of this article is devoted to a historical account of the rise of philanthropy/welfare as practices aimed at the constitution and reproduction of moral character among the poor, given the current crisis in capitalist welfare States and the renewed popularity of voluntary social agencies, it is perhaps appropriate to conclude with a few remarks about the contemporary situation.

The historical debates between liberals and social democrats about the size and responsibilities of the State are of course haunting us today, since post-war welfare States have proven to be much more easily discredited and dismantled than anyone in 1950 probably thought possible. Even as one fights to maintain the Fabian position that the State has a responsibility to provide a "national minimum", it is worth taking a closer look at the terms of the debate, the underlying assumptions that both sides of the welfare wars often take for granted. A key assumption is that moral capital has its proper circuit, and that those in whom the State invests owe something in return, something embodied in the poor's moral currency, character. In Canada that assumption was somewhat successfully contested for a time, for instance by those who argued that the family allowance was not a reward for moral mothering but rather a universal entitlement. But the ease with which the Mulroney government, cheered on by a media chorus, attacked the principle of universality makes one wonder whether the challenge to the moral capitalist perspective was ever as radical and broad-based as the optimistic writings of progressive social policy experts had led us to believe.

Progressives have very recently been forced to acknowledge that the idea of ensuring that the investment of welfare capital is returned in the shape of "decent" individual habits is not a remnant of the Victorian past: we see it every day both in

52. Beatrice Webb's personal life was dominated, from the tender age of 15, by a constant struggle against what she perceived as her "lower" passions. Sensual love, the pleasures of eating and drinking and even those of listening to religious music or reading anything not geared to social research, were enemies to be defeated in the service of a pure life of public service. Even her own moral capital seemed constantly imperilled. See The Diary of Beatrice Webb, supra note 47.
bourgeois pronouncements and in the populist working-class contempt for “scroungers”. It is therefore an appropriate time to re-examine the historical development of the relationship between economic and moral regulation. This re-examination, to which this article seeks to contribute, may well reveal that modern social welfare’s image of itself as completely different from Victorian philanthropy is a self-serving and hence distorted image. Further work on the way in which social programmes (even those, like unemployment insurance, originally touted as non-moralistic) are actually administered may shed new light upon the depth and breadth of moral regulation in contemporary society.