The relationship between family and welfare in Europe represents a central theme in Richard Smith’s work. While the focus of much of Richard’s work has been on England, his emphasis on the distinctive features both of family formation and the English Poor Law invites comparison with other areas of Europe, an invitation recognised by Richard himself. In this regard, his work can be situated in a wider historiography that has long characterised both family forms and welfare regimes in terms of a north-south divide. Put simply, northern Europe tends to be associated with nuclear family forms, “weaker” family ties, and relatively generous provision of poor relief, both overall but also, and particularly in the case of England, in rural areas. By contrast, southern Europe is associated with extended family forms, “stronger” family ties and less generous poor relief provision, restricted in the main to urban areas. The relationships between these variables are complex, yet have serious implications both for our understanding of economic development in Europe and for social policy, both past and present. This paper aims to offer a critical reflection on the current state of historiography and some of the claims made for different welfare regimes across Europe, including many questions raised by Richard’s work. It addresses the interrelationship between welfare regimes and family forms and ties and the merits of different welfare systems, including the comparison of rural and urban poor relief.

North-south divides
To begin by expanding further on the perceived differences between northern and southern European poor relief. Historians tend to make two claims for the superiority of poor relief in northern Europe: first, that overall levels of expenditure were higher and, echoing contemporary views, that relief was often better administered, and second, that relief was more widely available in rural areas. According to estimates made by Peter Lindert, England and the Dutch Republic were the countries spending the highest share of national income (around 1.75%) on their poor prior to 1795, ahead of France and Scandinavia. The parlous state of French poor relief by this date has been stressed by several historians, perhaps most forcefully by Olwen Hufton, in her pioneering work on the subject:

For antiquarians and Catholic historians, it has always been possible to be impressed by the range of institutions, produced by the efforts of the pious, which characterised formal relief before the Revolution [...]. This [...] should not cloud the main issue, the total inadequacy of formal relief anywhere.

In these assessments, local initiatives, such as the *bureaux de charité*, were haphazardly administered and difficult to sustain. Historians working on other regions of southern Europe have echoed these sentiments to varying degrees, and have even gone so far as to deny the existence of poor relief in rural areas at all. To give just one example, despite acknowledging that “little is known of rural poor relief”, Henry Kamen has nonetheless confidently asserted that “there is no doubt” that the only

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ongoing provision in early modern Catalonia was collections for the poor in churches.\(^3\) Such confidence is, however, the result of taking a relative lack of evidence to be a reflection of reality. As Paolo Viazzo commented some years ago, the comparative history of European poor relief is “plagued” by the problem that evidence was usually available for rural areas in the north and urban areas in the south.\(^4\) He called for a move away from the excessively urban focus of research into poor relief in southern Europe, proposing instead an investigation into local-level welfare provision and family support. It is certainly the case that evidence of poor relief practices in southern Europe is far easier to obtain for the large welfare institutions of the cities. Nonetheless, as will be discussed below, those historians who have so far heeded Viazzo’s call have been able to demonstrate that rural poor relief was certainly not inexistent in southern Europe, and that further efforts to ferret out evidence from archives would be well repaid.

Differences in welfare provision, while they are of intrinsic interest to historians, also have far greater importance in terms of their implications for family formation and demography. Various historians have described family forms in Europe as subject to a north-south divide or, perhaps more accurately, a north-west/south-east divide, following John Hajnal’s classic “line from Leningrad to Trieste”.\(^5\) Hajnal thought that Mediterranean Europe had much in common with Eastern Europe in terms of family formation and household structure. Northern or north-western Europe was thus characterised by a tendency to form nuclear households, late marriage for both sexes but especially women, high proportions of solitary households, particularly among the elderly, and high levels of migration. By contrast, while nuclear families were to be found in many areas of France, Spain, Portugal and Italy, extended family forms were more common than in the north, with couples continuing to live in the parental household after marriage, early marriage, at least for women and the elderly more often resident with kin. Beyond the question of family forms, which could and did vary, is the question of family ties. David Reher views southern European families, past and present, as subject to much stronger ties of loyalty than northern ones, reflected in differences between north and south in the frequency with which the elderly reside with kin or in institutions, the proportions of young people leaving home at different ages and before marriage, and the proportion of solitary households to be found in the population.\(^6\)

More important than these differences between family forms and family ties, however, are the claims that have been made for the significance of such differences. Hajnal had already suggested that there might be a relationship between the different household formation patterns of Europe, particularly north-west Europe, compared with those of Asia and Africa, and the different economic trajectories followed by these regions. Bolder still are the more recent claims of Jan de Vries and others that the

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explanation for northern Europe’s early transition to a capitalist, industrialised economy is to be found in part in the supposedly greater dynamism of the nuclear family. According to de Vries, the industrious revolution claimed by him as a precursor to the industrial revolution was possible only in north-west Europe, since this region combined the requisite institutional features, namely, open markets and a system of nuclear family formation that promoted independence and individualism. By contrast, “the claustrophobic bonds of extended kinship” prevented a similar industrious revolution from occurring in southern Europe.

However, as Richard Smith has pointed out, in company with Peter Solar, what may be most important in this regard is not family forms and ties themselves, but the factors underpinning and supporting them. In the English case, particular emphasis has to be placed on the poor law, and the extent to which it created a safety net that enabled the nuclear family to function and, above all, allowed labour to move freely by guaranteeing individuals support in times of hardship. Rather than restricting movement, the settlement laws made entitlement to relief relatively easy to obtain and, furthermore, were administered rationally in the sense that parishes frequently agreed between themselves to pay for the poor to remain in their parishes of residence rather than of settlement when the former option made more sense economically.

Other beneficial features of the English poor laws will be discussed below. For the moment, what remains to be considered is the other side of the relationship between welfare and family forms, that is, how different family structures affected the demand for welfare. A prominent feature of Richard Smith’s work has been to expand Peter Laslett’s concept of “nuclear family hardship”. Laslett proposed the idea that the nuclear family form dominant in northern Europe was more vulnerable to poverty than the extended family forms of southern Europe, since extended families could draw on a wider range of kin for support. Most at risk were the elderly, since high levels of migration and the preference for nuclear household formation meant an absence of co-resident or nearby kin able to offer support in old age. Smith has shown that a significant proportion of poor relief recipients in England were elderly, particularly widows. Similarly, work currently in progress on charity during the Dutch Golden Age has shown that almshouses for the elderly far outnumbered other charitable foundations. This is not to say, however, that Laslett was right to view the extended family as cushioned from hardship. There were important transfers of wealth from the “collectivity” in southern Europe. Extended families could not always offer protection in times of need. While nuclear hardship may have been most evident for the elderly; Viazzo and others have shown that the extended family was often hardest hit in the early stages of the life cycle, when burdened with young children

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and often also with elderly parents. This life-cycle difference is adduced as an explanation for the greater levels of abandonment of children in southern Europe.

Any future comparative research into poor relief in Europe must therefore address several key questions. What relief was available in rural areas? How adequate or otherwise was it? Were some welfare regimes more generous in terms of provision than others and why? If poor relief was concentrated in cities, what effect did that have on rural and urban populations alike? How were welfare practices adapted to different patterns of life-cycle poverty across Europe? In all of this, it must be remembered that welfare regimes were not static. All areas of Europe witnessed growing numbers of poor over the eighteenth century in particular, prompting fierce debates as to the best manner in which to respond to poverty, a debate in which the participants were frequently well aware of, and interested in, how other states dealt with their poor. The remainder of this paper will consider these questions in more detail, and will attempt to highlight similarities as well as differences between northern and southern Europe.

**Welfare provision in Europe: rural versus urban**

In answer to the first question as to what poor relief was available in rural areas, a fairly lengthy list can be drawn up, even if very little in-depth discussion can be provided as yet. In the first place, the focus on large urban institutions, such as the *Hôpitaux Généraux* or *Hotels-Dieux* in France, or the large hospitals to be found in Spanish and Italian cities, should not obscure the presence of a number of small, local institutions scattered around the countryside in smaller towns and even villages. There were 1,961 hospitals in France in 1791 of which 1,034 were in settlements with populations of fewer than 2,000. A rough count for one region of Spain, Catalonia, at the end of the eighteenth century, suggests there were around 80 hospitals outside of Barcelona. The capacity of these institutions varied: 768 French hospitals had 10 beds or fewer, for example. Likewise, their revenues also varied, but many were well-run and offered a degree of medical care and nursing to their residents. Daniel Hickey suggests that smaller French hospitals tended to have “modest means” but be relatively free from debt compared with larger institutions.

More importantly, where some attempt at quantification can be made, indoor relief in hospitals made up only a small proportion of the relief available in rural areas. It seems far more was available in terms of outdoor relief and almsgiving of different kinds. Italian and Spanish confraternities traditionally filled a welfare role from medieval times onwards, albeit one restricted to a certain extent to members, through assistance in sickness, at funerals and with dowry payments. Aid was not exclusively for members, however; many confraternities also ran hospitals and distributed alms. While greater concentrations of confraternities were to be found in towns, they also proliferated in the countryside. Quantifying the volume of relief they provided is impossible, and there is some debate as to how far they continued to play a welfare role during the eighteenth century, though there is a suggestion that in Spain, at least, some of the 25,038 confraternities in existence in 1771 were beginning to take on the characteristics of mutual aid societies rather than the wealthier, more

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hierarchical organisations of earlier periods. Another form of relief, a particular feature of southern Europe, was the charitable foundation for dowries, described by Stuart Woolf as a “ubiquitous symbol of ancien régime charity”.\(^{17}\) These were particularly common in many Spanish regions, where almost every community could boast one. While some were restricted to providing dowries for the founder’s family only, or for the daughters of guild or confraternity members, most were aimed at providing dowries for poor girls, usually one a year, selected by some form of lottery. Estimates made for just one Spanish diocese, that of Girona in Catalonia, show a total of 742 such foundations, dating from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries, with most founded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, amounting to around a million Catalan pounds in capital investment (bequests were usually invested in property or loans, and the rent or interest used to pay the dowries).\(^{18}\) Various types of almsgiving were also common, including regular bread doles, often administered by ecclesiastical organisations, and one-off distributions at funerals.\(^{19}\) While most bread doles appear to have been distributed only once or twice a year, usually on particular feast days or anniversaries, some of the larger ones gave out weekly or more frequent alms for several months of the year. Other types of almsgiving included bequests of clothes to the poor, distributions of alms after mass, on the doorsteps of churches, convents, monasteries and wealthy houses, often on a daily basis, as well as hospitality and shelter to travellers and pilgrims. Towards the end of the early modern period, there were attempts in some areas to bring different funds together at the parish level under the administration of a single body, such as the French bureaux de charité or Spanish Juntas de Caridad.\(^{20}\) Such funds were usually spent on different forms of outdoor relief, according to local needs and circumstances.

Hufton is therefore right that one should be impressed by the range of resources available, even if little has been done as yet to offer a detailed picture of these. More controversial, perhaps, is her claim that such resources were inadequate to deal with the problem of poverty. While some, more localised studies, such as that by Jones of the Montpellier region, support her claim to some extent, other historians have been less damning. Daniel Hickey concedes that the revenues of the bureaux de charité were “erratic” and that initiatives could be hard to sustain, but nevertheless argues that local elites could respond effectively to poverty, noting an increase in charitable donations for some areas over the eighteenth century, and greater expenditure upon outdoor relief.\(^{21}\) Moreover, as has been noted by Marco van Leeuwen, the situation in France at the end of the eighteenth century should not perhaps be taken as typical either of earlier periods or of Europe as a whole.\(^{22}\) The same caveat applies to Lindert’s data, described above, which also have the weakness that they cover formal relief by government and charitable organisations, but cannot measure donations in kind nor capture informal relief in the form of individual donations.

More importantly, as van Leeuwen also notes, any assessment of poor relief as “inadequate” depends on what poor relief was intended to achieve. Taken as the sole means of support for families, poor

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\(^{19}\) For examples, see Joaquim M. Puigvert, *Església, territori i sociabilitat (s.XVII-XIX)* (Vic, 2000), pp. 188-94; Miquel Borrell, *Pobresa i marginació a la Catalunya il·lustrada* (Santa Coloma de Farners, 2002), pp. 80-7.

\(^{20}\) Hufton, *Poor of eighteenth-century France*, pp. 159-73. There is no systematic study as yet of the Spanish equivalents, although for a local case study, see Ramon Arnabat, *Manuel Barba i Roca (1732-1824): entre l’humanisme i la Il·lustració* (Vilafranca del Penedès, 2006), pp. 127-61.

\(^{21}\) Hickey, *Local hospitals*, pp. 100-33, 185-7.

relief was probably inadequate everywhere, except perhaps England, but there was rarely the expectation, again, except perhaps under the English poor law, that relief was intended to be a permanent source of income that covered all a household’s needs. Rather, in most instances, it was conceived of as a supplement to other sources of income, part of Hufton’s “economy of makeshifts”, or as a means to survive a short-term crisis. While some of those advocating reforms to Spanish poor relief in the eighteenth century argued for the suppression of many alms and charitable foundations on the grounds that one or two bread doles a year did nothing to relieve the poor, others took the view that patching together small grants and gifts could make a contribution to a household’s survival strategies, and provide a means of getting by during winter months or after poor harvests. Viewed in this light, it is harder to dismiss rural poor relief in southern Europe as inadequate without a further investigation into the actual uses of such charity by the poor.

Alongside the question of “inadequacy”, however, lie other questions concerning the merits of different schemes of poor relief. One fierce criticism of much ancien régime poor relief in southern Europe was that it was “indiscriminate” in nature and thus served to create or at least reinforce the very problem of poverty by encouraging the idle poor to engage in vagrancy and other disruptive behaviour. Accounts by travellers from northern Europe inevitably feature the stereotypical description of the hordes of beggars crowding around the door of the church or convent, a stereotype about which some members of the clergy were becoming increasingly sensitive by the end of the eighteenth century. Almsgiving was a particular target of criticism. There were claims, for example, that households in Girona sent their servants to claim bread doles as a means of paying lower wages, and that crowds engaged in unseemly pushing and shoving at funerals in order to get a share of handouts. In both France and Spain, there were complaints that many beggars roamed the countryside extorting alms from remote households through threats of violence. In response, many proposals for reform, adopted earlier and with more enthusiasm in France, advocated the building of large general hospitals in towns into which the poor of the surrounding area could be admitted. In Spain, a growing preference among some thinkers for indoor relief in large institutions has also been characterised by historians as part of a general enlightened trend towards centralisation and secularisation of poor relief, education and the like.

One should not rush, however, to accept such evaluations at face value. Other contemporaries and historians alike have suggested that “indiscriminate” is too harsh a judgement. Almsgiving was not always indiscriminate: anecdotal evidence suggests it was often distributed in an orderly fashion, to known recipients. In rural areas, it may have been an important means of reinforcing seigneurial ties, and seems at the very least to have been part and parcel of the kind of paternalism required of those of...

23 See the discussion in Borrell, Pobresa, pp. 391-7, 499-505.
24 See, for example, Joseph Townsend, A Journey through Spain in the Years 1786 and 1787, 3 vols., (London, 1791), I, pp. 366, 378-9, II, pp., 6-9, 84-5, 98, 278, III, pp., 16-18, 57-60, 251-4. For criticism of indiscriminate charity among clerics by other clerics, see Francisco Antonio Lorenzana, Cartas, edictas y otras obras sueltas (Toledo, 1786), pp. ii-iii.
25 See the account by the Girona town council, dated 29th March 1734, reproduced in Borrell, Pobresa, pp. 537-9.
26 Hufton, Poor of eighteenth-century France, pp. 201-10; Borrell, Pobresa, pp. 30-3.
28 See, for example, Francisco de Zamora, Diario de los viajes hechos por Cataluña ed. R. Boixareu (Barcelona, 1973), p. 58, describing the distribution of alms at the convent of the Mercenarios in Vic, Catalonia, where the poor queued according to a set order.
higher social status. Moreover, outdoor relief at the local level could be adapted to fit the needs of families and maintain the independence and unity of households in situ. This is one of the merits often emphasised by champions of the English poor law, Richard Smith among them, but there are indications that relief could function in a similar manner in France and Spain. Even Hufton offers some rare praise for the locally administered ateliers de charité introduced by Turgot, describing them as a “sympathetic and highly imaginative recognition that the problem of poverty was a family problem”. In Spain, much of the opposition to the new large urban institutions or hospicios stemmed from the conviction that local poor relief funds were best deployed locally to help the poor in their own parishes, rather than transferring funds and poor alike to the hospicios, which, like their French equivalents, were often, though not always, inefficient and costly. Much more research needs to be done, as mentioned above, into the role played by the bureaux de charité and juntas de caridad in providing outdoor relief. One example that has come to light is the Junta de Caridad of a tiny Catalan village, Batea, which founded its charity committee in 1786, ahead of the better-known examples of Barcelona and the town of Vilafranca del Penedès. Accounts survive for only two years, 1786 and 1789. What is striking, however, is that both years the committee ended in credit; in 1789 with almost double the funds available at the start, simply through bequests and collections in church. In 1786, only 3% of expenditure went on indoor relief in the small local hospital. Of the rest, 43% had been spent helping 37 households through short-term periods of illness, paying for food, and the remaining 53% had gone on daily pensions to a crippled artisan, a poor widow with four children, another two widows and a young woman. In addition, the relatives of two orphan children were being paid to look after them and they were being educated. Most interestingly, the committee had brought two local girls, Benita Bernad and Francisca Altés, back from the Barcelona Misericòrdia hospital, along with an unnamed orphan boy, and was paying them to teach cotton spinning and carding to others, as well as apprenticing the boy to a rope-maker. The accounts for 1789 are even more impressive. The funds were 8998 reales in credit at the start, and had almost doubled the amount by the end through collections in church and donations from different individuals. Again, expenditure on the hospital was minimal: just 4.5% including the salary of the warden. The bulk of expenditure had gone on outdoor relief, either temporary help with illness or regular pensions to widows, orphans and labourers “burdened with children”, including milk for two babies, but also on the school for poor children. A new expense had been the purchase of five oilskins to loan to local families to carry oil up from the mill to their houses (the local economy was based on grain and olives).

Batea is, of course, just one example of poor relief at the local level in southern Europe. In the absence of additional evidence, it is impossible to say as yet how often local poor relief was generously funded and sensitively administered; and how often communities struggled to amass resources or lacked the individuals capable of administering them efficiently. Poor relief in southern Europe could share many of the merits of English poor relief in terms of helping poor households to survive without splitting them up or interning their members. It clearly could, in some places, such as the example of Batea, function well. The difference is that, in England, local efforts were sanctioned and given structure and direction by a national scheme of legislation, based on a system of compulsory taxation that effectively avoided the danger that some parishes would offer relief and

30 Hufton, Poor of eighteenth century France, p. 184.
31 On opposition to the hôpitaux généraux and the hospicios, see Hufton, Poor of eighteenth-century France, pp. 149-59; Callahan, “The problem of confinement”, pp. 13-16, 21-2; Borrell, Pobresa, pp. 391-7, 499-505.
32 The description of this committee and its surviving accounts are to be found in the Arxiu de la Diputació de Barcelona, illigals 12 and 13. See also Marfany, “Responses to poverty”.
33 Hickey also stresses the extent of local dynamism that existed in France. Hickey, Local hospitals, pp. 122-33.
others not (the “free rider” problem). A key question for further research into poor relief in southern Europe is therefore how far the absence of a system based on compulsory taxation affected the ability of parishes to raise revenue for the poor. Richard Smith has suggested that the consolidation of the poor laws permitted a sustained increase in the sums raised and expended upon poor relief over time. This brings us back to the question raised earlier with reference to Lindert’s work, namely, the relative generosity of poor relief across Europe. It would appear that formal relief expenditure at least was greater in England and the Dutch Republic than elsewhere. It remains an open question, however, whether greater generosity was the result of more efficient systems of raising revenue, a greater willingness to give to charitable causes, or of greater levels of overall wealth in these societies. As Richard shows effectively, however, what is most striking about comparisons between England and France is the much higher levels of relief provided in rural areas compared with urban in England than in France. Calculations made by one contemporary in 1792 suggested that the amount of relief raised in rural areas amounted to £1 per 2.6 inhabitants, compared with £1 per 6 inhabitants in large towns. That the burden of relief could be so effectively borne by the countryside in England is testimony to the strength of the agrarian economy though, at the same time, it may also reflect the greater need for support among a labouring class which was far more numerous than its continental equivalents. Nonetheless, at least until the late eighteenth century, England possessed a class of ratepayers capable of supporting the rural poor. The smaller size elsewhere of this “middling sort” group may be significant in explaining differences in welfare provision. Part of the strength of rural provision under the English Old Poor Law may also be due to the greater tendency of the English aristocracy and wealthy elites to maintain a continued presence in rural areas, rather than gravitating to the towns permanently. An additional question for studies of poor relief in southern Europe would be precisely to ascertain which groups within rural communities did take responsibility for the welfare of the poor. So far, considerable emphasis has been placed on the “pivotal” role of the parish priest, but by the eighteenth century, he may have been joined by “enlightened” figures within communities.

A particular insight of some of Richard’s recent work has been to recognise the demographic implications of extensive poor relief in rural areas, namely, preventing excessive migration to urban areas in times of crisis, and thus indirectly keeping overall mortality levels lower, given how severe the urban penalty was in early modern Europe. Harvest failures in southern Europe were correlated with rises in mortality, particularly in towns, in contrast to England, where parish-based poor relief combined with government intervention in grain markets prevented rising prices from translating into rising mortality. Moreover, the support offered by the Old Poor Law to illegitimate children arguably created a unique situation whereby illegitimacy ratios were lower in towns than in the country. The converse is certainly true of France: Jean-Pierre Bardet has shown that illegitimacy ratios in Rouen were of the order of 20%, compared with only 2% in the surrounding Normandy countryside. Bardet estimates that some 70% of urban illegitimate births were to immigrants. Given that such illegitimate children were then likely to be abandoned at foundling hospitals, with a consequently much higher risk of mortality, the final effect was to raise urban infant mortality rates still further. Whether the

35 Idem, “Social security as a developmental institution?”.
36 Ibid.
37 The description of the priest’s role as “pivotal” comes from Hufton, Poor of eighteenth-century France, p. 183. Similar claims are made by Norberg, Rich and poor in Grenoble, pp. 193-4 and by Puigvert, Església, pp. 88-110. An example of an enlightened figure who was very active in local poor relief efforts is the Catalan lawyer Manuel Barba i Roca: see Arnabat, Manuel Barba i Roca, passim.
same effect can be demonstrated for Italy or Spain remains to be seen. Overall illegitimacy ratios were far lower in Spain, and caution needs to be exercised when considering what proportion of foundlings were illegitimate. Historians suggest that the proportion actually fell over time. Nonetheless, it would seem to be the case that illegitimate children in both Spain and Italy almost invariably ended up in foundling hospitals.

More generally, Richard has suggested that English poor relief may have contributed directly and indirectly to keeping infant and particularly child mortality rates lower than elsewhere in Europe. The direct contribution took the form of relief payments to families burdened with young children, increasingly so over the eighteenth century. The indirect contribution came in the form of payments to the elderly, which in turn freed married couples from the obligation of caring for elderly kin, and left them able to invest more in their children instead, though it is worth noting in this context that nuclear households may have lost out in terms of the childcare that extended kin may have been able to offer. While difficult to test, the hypothesis that the poor law may have contributed to England’s fertility-driven “low pressure” demographic regime serves to underline still further the need for comparative studies of European poor relief and the effects of different systems.

This brings us back to the relationship between family forms and welfare provision. As discussed above, “nuclear hardship” is perceived to have hit the elderly the most, a factor certainly recognised by the Old Poor Law. The predominance at least until the eighteenth century of the elderly, particularly widows, among English poor law recipients, has been well documented in Richard’s work. More research needs to be done into how the elderly fared in southern Europe. It tends to be assumed that they were co-resident with kin, which was indeed the case in those areas where the extended family was the norm, but begs the question of what occurred in those areas characterised by nuclear families. The elderly were an obvious category to receive indoor support but, where the populations of hospitals have been analysed, the picture is mixed. Norberg found that around one-fifth of the inmates of the Grenoble hôpital général on the eve of the revolution were over sixty, but the same proportion were aged under five. Marital status and absence of kin appears to have been more important than age: 75% of the adult inmates were single men and women. The same is broadly true of the population of the Barcelona Misericòrdia hospital in the 1760s to 1780s where, although those over sixty had a visible presence, they were actually slightly underrepresented in terms of the proportion of the hospital population relative to that for Catalonia as a whole. In terms of age, young women dominated, but in terms of marital status, it was widows who were the most overrepresented category, followed by spinsters. The elderly therefore also figure to some extent as a vulnerable category, even in areas of predominantly extended families, but less so than in England. However, these figures are only for indoor relief. Quantification of the proportion of outdoor relief the elderly may have received is impossible, though further research might shed some light on how prominent they were among recipients.

Viazzo is certainly right that the strain of poverty appears to have hit hardest when families were burdened with young children, and that the formal indoor poor relief for which we have evidence tended to recognise this fact. The Spanish Crown towards the end of the eighteenth century tackled the increasing problem of child abandonment by calling for the foundation of more foundling hospitals to ease the burden on those of the big cities. At the same time, it was recognised that abandonment was the result of poverty rather than rising illegitimacy, in other words, many married couples were also choosing to abandon dependent children in the face of rising prices. Royal edicts thus forbade the labelling of foundlings as bastards. More importantly, there were calls for reform of existing foundling hospitals to counter the high mortality levels, particularly by placing more children with rural wet nurses, a practice which in turn can be seen as helping poor women find additional sources of income.

Orphans and young women in particular were another group increasingly targeted by formal relief programmes. Again, orphanages and hospitals specifically for women featured prominently among the new institutions founded in eighteenth-century Spain, a response to what Montserrat Carbonell has termed the growing “feminisation of poverty” during this period. An analysis of the petitions for entry into these establishments shows that family breakdown, particularly the death of or abandonment by the male head of household, was a frequent grounds for admission. It would be wrong to view families as abandoning daughters to these institutions; in some instances, this may have been the case, and petitions occasionally mention the desire to discipline wayward girls. In many cases, however, a stay in the Misericòrdia seems to have been viewed as a temporary measure to alleviate the burden on the family and to provide the girl herself with training that would enhance her opportunities for earning a living, either as a domestic servant or in the textile trades. The case of the two young women reclaimed by the Batea charity committee in order to teach spinning shows that parishes did not lose sight of the girls who entered these institutions, and that they were considered to have acquired skills worth passing on. Families thus made strategic use of indoor relief during difficult periods and at difficult points in the life-cycle.

What would be of interest to discover for southern Europe is how other types of poor relief fitted into this pattern. In other words, did the kinds of local, primarily outdoor relief that have yet to be studied also target orphans, young women and widows, or was the range of recipients broader? Certainly dowry funds were also for the benefit of young women, arguably compensating for the relative lack of waged labour for females, and helped in the initial stages of setting up a household. As yet, however, there is little indication as to who the main recipients of almsgiving were and what criteria, if any, governed their selection.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to survey differences in poor relief provision across Europe, with particular reference to the perceived north-south divide whereby southern poor relief was restricted to urban areas and supposedly inadequate both in terms of expenditure and the indiscriminate manner in which it was administered. By contrast, northern Europe, especially England, is argued as benefiting from generous expenditure on poor relief, relief that was more carefully targeted and, above all, widely available in rural areas. In turn, north-south divides in welfare provision can be seen as being closely bound up with differences in family forms and the strength of family ties. Whether nuclear families really were more dynamic than extended ones, as de Vries would have it, is debatable, but certainly

43 Carbonell, Sobreviure, pp. 112-21. See also Table 4 on p. 196.
poor relief provision, especially in England, may have played a vital role in sustaining the nuclear family by providing migrants and the elderly kin they left behind with a safety net. However, extended families were no less vulnerable to poverty, despite Laslett’s claims; merely, poverty hid hardest earlier in the life-cycle, when families were struggling with young children as well as with elderly kin. Formal, indoor relief in southern Europe was therefore concerned much more with the young: foundlings, orphans and especially young women, but the limited evidence so far suggests a wider range of recipients of outdoor relief at the local level.

The paper has questioned the view that poor relief in the south was restricted to urban areas, pointing to the evidence for a wide range of welfare in the countryside. It has also suggested that Hufton’s view that rural poor relief was “inadequate” may be unfair: not only is our knowledge of rural poor relief too thin to endorse such a claim but, more importantly, assessments of the adequacy of welfare depend very much on the degree to which poor relief was supposed to subsidise the household economy. Welfare in southern Europe was undoubtedly a patchwork of different institutional and individual gifts, but that is not to say that households could not and did not draw upon these different sources in order to make a significant contribution to their incomes. Urban institutions may well have taken more of the strain in difficult years, but how skewed the balance between rural and urban poor relief was remains to be seen.

None of this is to deny the unique features of the English Old Poor Law, so effectively highlighted in Richard’s work. It is highly plausible that this system based on compulsory taxation and administered through local parishes can be credited with enabling aspects of economic growth, and with beneficial effects in terms of lower mortality. All that is proposed here is an investigation into the workings of rural poor relief elsewhere in Europe. Even in the absence of a framework such as the English poor law, some communities at least seem to have managed to respond to the problem of poverty with a certain degree of dynamism. How typical they were and how successful their efforts could be are questions that would merit further research and, ultimately, would serve to contextualise the achievements of the English poor law.