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Sommario/riassunto

Originally published in 1976. This book is a study of the charitable institutions of one French town, Aix-en-Provence. It begins with their foundation during the Counter-Reformation and ends with their dissolution during the Revolution. It details the impulses behind their foundation and describes how they were financed and administered. It also explores the lives of the people they helped. The study is based primarily on surviving records of the charities. These are the same sort of records that charitable institutions today accumulate: entrance registers, minutes of board meetings, account books, and fund-raising pamphlets. Records of the local and central government and court records were also consulted. One purpose of this study is to bring readers closer to the reality of the problem of poverty in Old Regime France. Another purpose is to historicize contemporary perceptions of poverty in the minds of French historical actors. Chapter 1 outlines the social and economic makeup of Aix-en-Provence. Chapter 2 deals with the attitudes and assumptions behind the foundation of the charities. Chapter 3 describes how the institutions were administered and financed, and the many important roles they played in the community at large. Chapter 4 describes the types of assistance available to the poor and the types of people who received it. Chapter 5 discusses the most important alternatives to charity for the needy—beggary and crime. After 1760, the traditional charities entered a period of decline. Both the economic and social realities of poverty, and popular perceptions of those realities, changed drastically after 1760. Flooded by increasing numbers of the poor, paralyzed financially because of declining donations and general mismanagement, repudiated by public opinion, and subject to increasing control by the state, the charities were ineffective and indeed almost moribund after 1760. Chapters 6 and 7 detail these developments.