

International Conference

**A social question before the Social Question:
Addressing poverty in the long eighteenth century**

University of Oxford
22-23 October 2026

Call for Papers

Precariousness and hardships were inescapable features of the life of the lower orders in early modern European society. In the Age of Enlightenment, just like in previous centuries, the majority of the population either lived in poverty or faced the constant risk of becoming unable to meet basic needs. Throughout the long eighteenth century, rulers and reformers alike showed sustained interest in the problem of poverty, with the purpose of improving the condition of their poorer subjects and countrymen and indirectly stabilising the social order. This concern took on multiple forms, ranging from the introduction of new institutions of confinement and labour to the critique of long held systems of relief like the English Poor Laws, and is testified by the widely participated academic prize contests on poverty and indigence of those years. At the same time, traditional conceptions of charity were redefined in secular terms – e.g. *bienfaisance*, *Gemeinnützigkeit*, philanthropy – while the French Revolution and radical movements inspired innovative approaches that resonated well into the nineteenth century.

Yet the attention paid to poverty by eighteenth-century rulers and reformers cannot be reduced to a pragmatic response to pressing social needs. Those concerns were also closely tied to broader philosophical developments, including the emergence of a secular conception of history in which human beings, rather than divine providence, were seen as major agents of change. This new perspective made progress in the human condition conceivable, stimulating novel interest in society and encouraging the development of new solutions aimed to reform existing institutions. At the same time, the decline of manorial serfdom and the emergence of a “free” labour market, alongside the transition from mercantilism to political economy, brought about new ideas of population, scarcity, social mobility, and work discipline. Unlike their predecessors, Enlightenment reformers no longer viewed poverty as part of a godly plan but rather as a consequence of human institutions and practices. Whereas some of them considered it as an injustice standing in stark contradiction with natural law theories of equality, others saw it as the unavoidable outcome of the dynamics of production, which mandated the existence of poverty as a necessary spur to industry. Breaking with the past, Enlightenment thinkers thereby framed poverty as *a* distinctively social question well before the nineteenth century made *the* Social Question a crucial political issue.

This international conference seeks to shed light on the innovations introduced by Enlightenment debates on poverty that paved the way for the later emergence of the Social Question. It solicits presentations on reform projects developed – and occasionally applied – in the long eighteenth century that were aimed to address poverty as the key social issue of the age, breaking with traditional approaches based on Christian theology and morals. Of special interest will thus be Enlightenment reform projects that sought to find a solution to the social consequences of contemporary economic dynamics and questioned existing institutions and theoretical frameworks of poor relief. Participants will be encouraged to reflect on the novelty of these eighteenth-century schemes, their relation to both older systems, modern notions, and novel disciplines (including natural law and political economy), and their potential impact on and legacy in early nineteenth-century reflections on pauperism and the development of the Social Question.

Papers will ideally (but not exclusively) deal with the following topics:

- Reform projects aimed at eradicating poverty, mitigating or governing its social consequences, reducing inequality, and reframing practices of assistance
- Reflections on the concept of poverty in its interpenetration with notions of property, social (in)equality, natural law, and “the rights of man”
- Proposals for the introduction of new property regimes (e.g. privatisation of communal properties, redistribution and/or communalisation of private property)
- Social schemes aimed to promote the independence of the lower orders and minimise their risk of falling into poverty (e.g. pedagogical institutions, mutual organisations, savings banks), and their disciplinarian implications
- Critiques of traditional forms of solidarity, either vertical or horizontal (e.g. feudal social relations, guilds, mutual help, fraternal societies, confraternities)
- Reflections on practices of assistance and the notions that sustained them (e.g. charity, *bienfaisance*, *Gemeinnützigkeit*, philanthropy)
- Radical perspectives on poverty and solutions to it “from below”
- Case studies on the interrelation between poverty, race, and gender

The conference is organised by Damiano Bardelli (University of Oxford, Voltaire Foundation visiting fellow) with the support of the Voltaire Foundation and the Swiss National Science Foundation.

Proposals in English, including an **abstract of 250 words** and a **short biography and list of selected publications**, should be sent to damiano.bardelli@chess.fr by **31 December 2025**.

Applicants will be notified about the outcome of their submission by 31 March 2026.