

## **Women, Economic Instability, and Poverty in London During the Nineteenth Century**

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During the nineteenth century in London, the focus of attention came to be on the “existence of great poverty in the midst of plenty.”<sup>1</sup> Opinions of the origin of this poverty varied. A popular opinion among the upper classes of society was that a lack of morality among the poor had bred a culture of poverty, and that poor relief promoted this pauperism.<sup>2</sup> However, a culture of poverty was not born out of a lack of morality among the working class of nineteenth century London. The poverty, rather, was a result of economic uncertainty as well as gendered expectations, which some relief programs perpetuated.

It is evident that the poor of London were characterized as immoral. Throughout this time “London’s population was polarized into a discrete and demoralized working class that was being discovered by a middle class increasingly anxious about its ability to exercise power and authority.”<sup>3</sup> The poor were dehumanized by a majority of society. In his description of the poor of nineteenth century London, Jules Valles states:

On a sudden there comes a stench of totting rags, or fermented filth; we are passing a lane or court, some squalid passage swarming with a whole tribe of poor ruffians. One can see them from the pavement without entering, like bugs lurking in the chink of a bed stead.<sup>4</sup>

This dehumanization brought about a shift in the perception of the urban poor, “from recognizable individuals to the poor en mass.”<sup>5</sup> The mass of poor became synonymous with a demoralized lower class.

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<sup>1</sup> Hennock, E.P.. “Poverty and Social Theory in England: The Experience of the Eighteen-Eighties.” *Social History* (1976): 67.

<sup>2</sup> MacKay, Lynn. “A Culture of poverty: The St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse, 1817.” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (1995): 209.

<sup>3</sup> Copelman, Dina M.. “The Gendered Metropolis: Fin-de-Siecle London.” *Radical History Review* (1994): 39.

Certainly, this was a misconception of the poor. At this time, it was accepted by a majority that “external appearance was an exact reflection of internal reality; both a sign and a consequence of the moral condition.”<sup>6</sup> However, that was not the case. The statement would be more accurate if it stated that external appearances reflected simply the living and working conditions of individuals. For example, the bourgeois and upper class women dressed very strictly with laces, corsets, veils and gloves, so that their bodies were properly covered. The poor working-class women were often seen with dirty and torn skirts and blouses, messy hair, sweat stained armpits and unrestrained breasts. This style, according to the bourgeois, reflected a “vulgarity and carelessness implying the worst sort of sensuality.”<sup>7</sup> In reality, it was a reflection of the fact that they maintained a different lifestyle in which laces, corsets, veils, and gloves were not practical in a working environment.

In addition, although the bourgeois and upper classes believed that the whole of the impoverished citizens of London was characterized by habits such as slothfulness, vulgarity, and uncleanness, this was not true. A small majority of the poor could be characterized in this way. In Charles Booth’s classification for a survey of London’s poverty, he characterized what he referred to as Class A as the ‘lowest class of occasional labourers, loafers, and semi-criminals, which involved the question of disorder rather than poverty,’<sup>8</sup> and determined them to consist only of 0.9% of the 30.7% of the poor in London. By distinguishing between this class and the rest of the poor, Booth negated the popular belief, he stated:

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<sup>4</sup> Barret-Ducrocq, Françoise. *Love in the Time of Victoria*. New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1989. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Green, David R.. *From Artisans to Paupers: Economic Change and Poverty in London 1790-1870*. Aldershot, England: Scholar Press, 1995. 181.

<sup>6</sup> Ducrocq 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ducrocq 11.

<sup>8</sup> Hennock 73.

The hordes of barbarians of whom we have heard, who, issuing from their slums, will one day overwhelm modern civilization, do not exist. There are barbarians, but they are a handful, a small and decreasing percentage: a disgrace but not a danger.<sup>9</sup>

The remainder of the poor were “honest, thrifty and industrious men”<sup>10</sup> who became destitute because of conditions existing in London at the time.

Industrialization of the nineteenth century, allowed for the cultivation of great wealth. However, the wealth could only be obtained by a relatively small few at the expense of a majority that became poor. Socialist intellectuals throughout the world at this time, such as Marx, were troubled by this problem. They aspired to organize industrial production to produce wealth without the dehumanization of any. However, the goals of these thinkers were not realized at the time, and such were the conditions existing in London. Majorities of people were employed at low wages to benefit those who reaped the profit of their work.

In addition, the urbanization that resulted from the industrialization created severe problems of overcrowding. The geography of poverty in nineteenth-century London consisted in “slums, or rookeries as they became known, pockets of overcrowded and unsanitary housing tucked from view behind the main thoroughfares and wealthier streets.”<sup>11</sup> In such places, working-class households with one room living were the norm.<sup>12</sup> Slum growth was perpetuated by the high costs of rent in London, which accounted for as much as one-sixth of weekly household incomes.<sup>13</sup> Also, the slums grew as a result of the fact that the rich required

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<sup>9</sup> Hennock 7.

<sup>10</sup> Hennock 77.

<sup>11</sup> Green 181-2.

<sup>12</sup> Green 182.

<sup>13</sup> Green 141.

attendants-servants, porters, cooks, washerwomen, et al.- who needed to live near their employers due to the long hours of work and the high costs of transportation.<sup>14</sup>

Economic stability, was also not the normal experience of London's laboring class. Many trades in which the poor were employed were 'subject to the vagaries of the season.'<sup>15</sup> In the spring, when the rich congregated in London, there was a demand for workers in luxury trades, but this demand dwindled in the winter months. Economic instability was also attributable as Hill, a prized essayist on the solution of poverty, states, to 'an overstocked labour market.'<sup>16</sup> Industrialization decreased the number of workers needed for production. Therefore, the economic instability of the poor was in the form of unemployment, or staggered employment.

Studies by both Booth and Rowntree illustrated that the two main causes of poverty were related to questions of employment and the incidence of ill health, and that they accounted for about two-thirds of London poverty.<sup>17</sup> The ill health of the poor can be directly correlated with the slums where overcrowding and lack of sanitation inevitably led to the spread of epidemic disease.<sup>18</sup> Studies by Lynn MacKay of the inmates of The St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse, also emphasized staggered employment and ill health as major causes of poverty. Her study concluded that during the winter, a time of higher unemployment, entrance into the workhouse was 26% higher than during the summer. In addition, it determined that in female-headed families 20% of the entrances were due to illness and in male-headed families 30%.<sup>19</sup> As Booth

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<sup>14</sup> MacKay 212.

<sup>15</sup> MacKay 213.

<sup>16</sup> Hennock 77.

<sup>17</sup> Green 188.

<sup>18</sup> Green 182.

<sup>19</sup> MacKay 213&25.

stated, “the nature of the economy, not the character of the individuals, was recognized to be at fault.”<sup>20</sup>

Gendered expectations perpetuated both poverty and the ideas that immorality existed among the poor. Women were the victims of these expectations. Certainly, low wages caused extremely high amounts of poverty among them. During 1817/1818, male workers earned between 10s. and 20s. a week, while women often earned little more than 6s., which was below the subsistence level.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the range of occupations open to women was restricted.

Gendered expectations allowed this poverty to be viewed as a consequence of immorality. Women of the working class during the nineteenth century were expected to fulfill a triplicate role of mother, housekeeper, and worker. Although required to fulfill such a role, women were still not acknowledged with the same social status as men. As Ducrocq states they “were the object of more or less permanent disapproval, first for the irritation and affront occasioned by their very presence.”<sup>22</sup> The bourgeois women began a gradual withdrawal from active life in the eighteenth century and were virtually secluded by the nineteenth century. For this reason, any “wandering about which could not be explained by shopping or some other necessary activity came to be perceived as a factor or sign of doubtful morality.”<sup>23</sup> The role of working class women required that they lead an active lifestyle, and therefore their presence on the outside caused the upper classes to make false judgements of them as immoral.

Their uncleanness was also seen as a sign of immorality. For example, the problem of lice that existed among school children because of the unsanitary conditions of the slums was turned into a defect among working class mothers. As Copelman states, “These charges were

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<sup>20</sup> Hennock 80.

<sup>21</sup> MacKay 214.

<sup>22</sup> Ducrocq 10.

launched primarily against working-class mothers, since they were responsible for laundry and general household hygiene.”<sup>24</sup> Even upper class women who urged for reform, did so on the basis that the many women factory workers were “exploited and stunted female workers, hindered from fulfilling their duties as present or future wives and mothers, because of their miserable work conditions.”<sup>25</sup> This further illustrates the fact that conditions created for the working-class woman, the impossibility of successfully fulfilling their triplicate role in society. MacKay concluded in her study that the “disproportionately large number of female inmates of St. Martin's aged sixteen to forty-four can be accounted for by their greater economic vulnerability, as well as by their care of dependent children.”<sup>26</sup>

Unfortunately, some forms of poor relief perpetuated gendered expectations and economic instability. Wages offered in workhouses such as St. Martin's were substantially lower than those offered in the community at large. This practically assured that upon leaving the workhouse inmates would not be economically prepared to survive. In addition, paupers were often removed to distant parishes where they would be on their own and have a considerably harder time finding work. The motivation of parish authorities to relocate the paupers was that once they were “removed they became the financial responsibility of the parish of settlement.”<sup>27</sup>

In addition, in his description of the slum clearance program of 1875-1888, Yelling states:

The insanitary condition of districts was never the highest priority in the Board's selection of sites. The areas cleared were, of course, insanitary but there was always some additional reason for choosing them from among other contending schemes.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ducrocq 10.

<sup>24</sup> Copelman 43.

<sup>25</sup> Copelman 45

<sup>26</sup> MacKay 221.

<sup>27</sup> MacKay 222.

Again, the interests of the relief authorities were not that of the best interest of the poor, but instead economic interests of their own. The policies of workhouses, such as St. Martin's, conformed to and therefore perpetuated gendered expectations. Both girls and boys in the workhouse were taught elementary subjects such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. However, girls were given the additional task of cleaning their wards and being instructed in domestic tasks. Boys also received a greater deal of training, while the small amount of training girls received was in the "various needle trades, which were notorious for bad working conditions, lower than subsistence wages, and labor surplus."<sup>29</sup> In short, these policies of the workhouse ensured that "women received substandard educations and substandard wages."<sup>30</sup>

Certainly, not all poor relief was negative. However, the fact can not be ignored that some relief policies helped promote economic instability and gendered expectations. Economic instability in the form of unemployment or staggered employment, and poor sanitation, as created by industrialization and urbanization, as well as gendered expectations of the nineteenth century resulted in mass poverty in London. A lack of morality among the poor was not the cause of poverty. It was an image created by the upper classes, because of the polarization of London into the working class and upper classes that maintained completely different lifestyles.

## **Bibliography**

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<sup>28</sup> Yelling, J.A.. "The selection of sites for slum clearance in London, 1875-1888." *Journal of Historical Geography* (1981): 162.

<sup>29</sup> MacKay 230-1.

<sup>30</sup> MacKay 231.

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