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POPULAR REACTIONS TO SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH: THE CASE OF CHARLES BOOTH

KEVIN BALES

Abstract When Charles Booth first published his research on poverty in London in 1886 he became what might have been the first sociological 'household name'. His findings were widely reported around the world and across newspapers of very different political orientation. As social scientists continue to grapple with the difficulties and rewards of publicity it is worth looking back to this first instance of the political and media uses of social research. In particular, it is worth noting the triangular and reflexive relationship between the researcher, the media, and policy makers.

Key Words: Charles Booth; history of research, media, social policy, social research.

Today sociologists and other social researchers both court and flee from the attentions of the 'media'. For every happy occurrence of research truthfully and reasonably presented to the public, there is another horror story of years of hard work distilled into a misleading and sensationally denigrating sound-bite. Most of us would love our normally obscure academic research to be widely reported, yet social scientists who have become household names are rare indeed. Occasionally the light of publicity falls on a social researcher and in doing so it also illuminates the reflexive and symbiotic relationships between the researcher, the media, the public and often, ultimately, policy makers. In the history of the social sciences probably the first researcher to undergo this experience was Charles Booth.

Contemporary social scientists face many of the same types of response as did Charles Booth. McRobbie and Thornton (1995) have highlighted the role of the 'moral panic' in the triangular relationship of sociology, the media, and public policy. While their work focussed on youth culture and drug takers in post-war Britain, Booth's own research was sparked off by precisely such a 'panic' – the public reaction to the widespread rioting which gripped London in early February 1886. Most of the press of the day presented these riots as Britain teetering on the brink of social revolution (they were actually about hunger and lack of work in that harsh winter), and politicians concentrated on suppression rather than understanding. That journalism failed to foster clarity in social policy decision making is also a story repeated today. Golding has shown how an electronic media becoming more and more integrated with the entertainment industry 'provides an inadequate basis for citizens to fulfil their role' (1994:461). This is not surprising in the light of Evans's finding that while print and broadcast journalists demarcate between social science and

natural science, they often fail 'to demarcate between social science and lay perspectives . . . [and] social science is portrayed as a less distinctive and valid way of knowing' (1995:168).

It is very unlikely that Charles Booth had any notion that his research would generate intense media interest. When he began his survey of London's East End in the mid-1880s, the state of inquiry into poverty was in disarray. The overemphasis on moral questions which characterised the work of the main organisation concerned with relief and social policy, the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, had, by this time, led to an explanatory dead end. Yet as the ability of their inquiries to address and answer the 'Poverty Question' diminished, the need for social research was increasing. The Poverty Question, with the Irish Question, was the defining political debate of the period. It centred on the assertion that great and worsening poverty existed in the heart of the richest capital of the richest empire in the world, an assertion strongly denied by significant parts of the political and economic elite. It was a debate which spun in circles as the lack of factual information stymied both sides of the argument. Unresolved, the situation which gave rise to the debate worsened and came to a head in the winter of 1886.

That winter, through an unhappy convergence of climatic, economic and political conditions the plight of the poor working class of London was grave and getting worse, and public awareness and concern was steadily increasing (Crouzet 1982; Deane and Cole 1967; Rose 1981; 1985; Stedman Jones 1971). The emiseration of the East End pressed on its inhabitants and pushed them to unprecedented public actions – such as the Trafalgar Square riots in February 1886. And while there was little or no chance that these bursts of frustration and demand would become an actual threat to the stability of London's social system, the working class of the East End was *perceived* as a threat by much of the rest of London, by opinion shapers and policy makers. It was generally believed that a serious threat to public order existed, and reputable journals discussed the possibility of social revolution.

Booth began interviewing School Board Visitors and collecting other information six months after the major riots in February 1886. As Booth's research continued into the autumn of 1887, more demonstrations and confrontations occurred. In the worst of these, now known as Bloody Sunday (13 November 1887), a series of demonstrations and marches were broken up with much brutality by the police. The demonstration marking the funeral of one Bloody Sunday victim was attended by an estimated 120,000 people and ended in the East End Bow Cemetery.

In spite of dire warning of revolution in the press, as his research progressed Booth was one of the first to realise how atomised the East End working class truly was, and how little they were able to organise any form of action, much less threaten the social order. This finding alone was seen as a breakthrough by many commentators when Booth announced his results. The social and

political climate shaped the nature of Booth's research questions, and in turn his results were to shape social and political responses to poverty. Essentially, Booth attempted to answer three relatively simple questions about poverty in London: How many people are living in poverty? What brought them to poverty or keeps them impoverished? And what might be done to alleviate this poverty? His results changed the nature of the circular debate around the Poverty Question by forcing it on to other themes. Put very simply, he found that as much as one-third of the population lived at or below his absolute level of poverty, and that this poverty was much more likely to be caused by unemployment or underemployment rather than any personal failing, such as alcohol abuse. To the third question he made a very tentative suggestion, following other commentators, that the poorest might best be served by removing them to 'industrial or labour colonies' to be 'well housed, well fed, and well warmed; and taught and trained, and employed from morning to night, ... [and] The good results to be hoped for from such "limited socialism" would be manifold' (Booth 1889:167–9). These relatively simple findings aroused a storm of public response (see Bales 1992 for a full explanation of his findings). The response was first seen in the press reports on the findings of his Poverty Study.

Newspaper and Magazine Reports of Booth's Work[1]

Outside the Royal Statistical Society and Booth's circle, the first public reports of the Inquiry followed Booth's presentation to the Society of his paper 'The Inhabitants of Tower Hamlets (School Board Division), their Condition and Occupations' in May 1887. The statisticians of the Royal Statistical Society were critical and wary in their reception, but the press was much more accepting. The newspaper reports on his research published in late May 1887 were an important turning point in Booth's career. Before the publication of these reviews Booth was little known outside his own circle of families and friends. It is true that while he had met and discussed social issues of the day with many of the key figures in London – Octavia Hill, the Barnetts, Joseph Chamberlain, H. M. Hyndman – he had contributed nothing to the public discourse. Now his research seemed to answer the right question at the right moment.

Just over one year after the Trafalgar Square riots, and the public scrapping between the Charity Organisation Society and the Mansion House (the seat of government for the City of London) over the disbursement of relief funds, Booth offered partial resolution to an acrimonious public debate. The journalistic response was not to weave Booth's work into this debate, however, but to treat it as news. One very sensational article about Booth's work entitled 'London's Suffering Millions' was reproduced in newspapers around the world. The illumination of what had become in the minds of the public

'darkest London' was exciting. That it was accomplished by a private individual made it doubly so. As Booth had explained in his paper to the Statistical Society (1887:376):

> It is the sense of helplessness that tries everyone; the wage earners, as I have said, are helpless to regulate or obtain the value of their work; the manufacturer or dealer can only work within the limits of competition; the rich are helpless to relieve want without stimulating its sources; the legislature is helpless because the limits of successful interference by change of law are closely circumscribed . . . To relieve this sense of helplessness, the problems of human life must be better stated. The *a priori* reasoning of political economy, orthodox and unorthodox alike, fails from want of reality. At its base are a series of assumptions very imperfectly connected with the observed facts of life. We need to begin with a true picture of the modern industrial organism, the interchange of service, the exercise of faculty, the demands and satisfaction of desire. It is the possibility of such a picture as this that I wish to suggest, and it is as a contribution to it that I have written this paper.

Many of the newspapers reporting on his findings took Booth at his word; this inquiry would be an antidote to the pervasive sense of helplessness in the face of the problem of poverty. Only the *Pall Mall Gazette* criticised Booth severely, asking whether Booth 'had adequately realised the struggles and privations of even the best paid of those who figure in his tables . . . [the paper] reads too much like a complacent and comforting bourgeois statement of the situation' (13 October 1887). Booth took up these criticisms in his next paper to the Statistical Society and the *Pall Mall Gazette* would change its position on Booth's work the next year. But most newspapers reported in much the same way as the *Morning Post* did on a 'very curious and interesting inquiry . . . just completed in East London' (26 May 1997):

> It is extraordinary that a private individual should not only have dared to take in hand, but should have been able to successfully carry out, an elaborate investigation as to the occupations, earnings, and social condition of half a million persons, or no less than one-eighth of the inhabitants of the Metropolis; and this in the very poorest districts, where the circumstances of the population present more difficulties. Yet this is what has been done by Mr Charles Booth, and we venture to say that the facts and figures which he laid before the Royal Statistical Society last week, as the first results of the inquiry in question, are more valuable than a ton of the average blue-books on pauperism, or an ocean of sensational writing on progress and poverty . . . Such hard facts as have been collected in this inquiry form the best basis for the efforts both of the legislator and the philanthropist.

The general reports on his paper on Tower Hamlets made it much easier for Booth to proceed quickly with the Inquiry. In the spring of 1889 the first volume was published. Entitled *Life and Labour of the People. Volume One: East London*, it was published by Williams and Norgate. Beatrice Potter, Booth's young cousin by marriage and better known today as Beatrice Webb, refers to it from the beginning as '*Life and Labour*'. In her diary of 17 April 1889 she writes proudly of '*Life and Labour* on my table with my name standing out as a

contributor' (cited in MacKenzie and MacKenzie 1986:282). Four days later she records '"The Book" a great success and Charles Booth delighted. Leaders in all the principal papers, and C.B. quite the head of the statistical tree.' The second volume would be published in 1891, with the title changed to *Labour and Life of the People, London, Continued*, also by Williams and Norgate. The alteration was thought necessary because Samuel Smiles had published a book in 1887 called *Life and Labour* and there was worry over copyright. But from 1892, and the second edition, this time published by Macmillan and Company, the work would take on the name it is commonly known by: *Life and Labour of the People in London*. The first edition rapidly sold out. As Simey and Simey (1960:107) explain, even though the book was 'repetitive and diffuse':

> the general effect was overwhelming. The stark fact of the unexpectedly high proportion of the population living in poverty had already received wide publicity after the presentation of his Papers, but the mass and the evident veracity of the detailed evidence with which it was now supported gave it a fresh and startling power to shock . . .

As would be expected, the first reviews of Booth's book appeared in the popular press. Booth or his publishers maintained an extensive clipping file from the release of the first volume in April 1889. The expanded findings published in Volume One were considered very newsworthy at the time. Nine countries are represented in the 251 reviews surviving in a scrapbook in the Booth archive in the British Library of Political and Economic Science. Several newspapers published their reviews in instalments, as in the *Leeds Mercury* and the *Jewish Chronicle*, taking up 'Poverty' in one issue and the 'Special Subjects' in the next. Only rarely was the press report a brief notice of publication or condensed review. Twenty column inches would be about the average length, though some were much longer, such as the *Bradford Observer*'s forty-nine inches of extremely small type.

Though the publication of *Life and Labour* was treated as 'news' exactly what sort of news it was varied from newspaper to newspaper. In general the reviews opened up *Life and Labour*, rather than concentrating on the Poverty Line or the wages levels and other information used to demarcate the classes. The reviews tended to look closely at those more qualitative sections which their readers might compare to their own knowledge. The statistical side was more appreciated, for its readability and clarity, than critiqued. But the political orientations of the various newspapers and journals also coloured the reports. Booth must have been one of the first social scientists to have the opportunity to observe his simply and factually stated research results twisted to the many editorial slants of various journals.

The Times (1 December 1886) welcomed the work: 'The book makes its appearance at an opportune time, when public interest has been excited about the condition of the London poor, and when the efforts of philanthropists are

in more than common need of guidance by the light of facts.' This idea of misguided philanthropy is the theme of *The Times* review. The proportion of the population found to be living in poverty is passed over very quickly: 'four lowest classed comprise together somewhat more that a third of the inhabitants of East London' (1 December 1886). Much more space is devoted to a comparison of dock labourers, who have lapsed into degeneracy, with Jews 'well capable of making it in the world'. *The Times* concludes that *Life and Labour* demonstrates 'the twofold evil' of indiscriminate charity ('it weakens and degrades') and that Booth 'tells us . . . how large a part of the misery of East London has been due to this cause'. The *Athenaeum* (27 April 1887) found the book too pedestrian to be of serious interest: 'The book is entirely without literary merit but contains information useful for philanthropists. It has a curious map of East London . . . There is no attempt to make the book readable, nor is it provided with an index, so that its perusal is a work of solid labour.'

Of the philanthropists interested in Booth's work the Charity Organisation Society (COS) might have been expected to show the greatest interest, but for the COS Booth's proposals for 'limited socialism' were totally objectionable. His plans they damned (*COS Review*, May 1889) with the faintest of praise:

> It would be especially ungracious to quarrel with Mr Booth for his single excursion into the pleasant dreamland of world-making. He has fairly earned the relaxation, and the modesty with which his scheme of sanctified pauperism disarms criticism.

Booth's 'scheme of sanctified pauperism' (*COS Review*, May 1889), his suggestion that the poorest (his 'Class B') should be removed by government intervention from the labour market and sent into 'Industrial Colonies' was taken up by most reviewers and given attention far out of proportion to its position within the mass of other findings. In that it represented an answer, albeit tentative, to the 'poverty question', it was readily seized upon and discussed. This discussion most clearly showed the various political interpretations of Booth's findings. The notion of 'Labour Colonies' was treated in three distinct ways in the press: condemnation by those on the political right, cautious acceptance by moderates and the centre-left, and with complete apathy from the socialists.

To those on the political right Booth's suggestion was seen as wasteful and destructive socialism. The *St James Gazette* (19 April 1889) wrote that it was 'remarkable that Mr Booth . . . though he is a strong enough advocate of laissez-faire . . . would make them (class B) men, women, and children, pensioners on the State'. The *Leeds Mercury* (19 April 1889) twisted Booth's suggestion of removal from the labour market coupled with aid, training and employment into a rather more chilling solution – stating that after consideration 'in almost every essential aspect, Mr Booth is driven to the conclusion that the great object to be aimed at is the extirpation as a class of the casual labourers'. A common image used by editors on the political right is that of

the poor as an infection or disease that does, indeed, deserve extirpation. Thus, the *Leeds Mercury* (19 April 1889):

> The recurrence winter after winter, of agitations – having sometimes a savour of menace – in the alleged interests of the unemployed; the pathetic appeals made also at each returning Christmas for the multitudes who are represented as either famishing or on the borders of destitution; and the stories of such writers as Mr Walter Besant have combined to produce a wide-spread feeling that in East London the diseases of our body politic are present in peculiarly intense and virulent forms. And the series of ghastly crimes which horrified the whole country a few months ago, together with the repulsive revelations which they elicited as to the manner of life . . . of East London served to bring home anxiety and even apprehension.

The 'ghastly crimes' referred to are the murders which in time would be attributed to 'Jack the Ripper'. The image of the poor as disease was carried further in the aptly named *Graphic* (20 April 1889):

> It is a very depressing picture which Mr Booth presents to the public in his work on East London. Out of a population of nine hundred thousand, it is estimated that about one third are loafers, criminals, and casual toilers who turn their hands to evil on slight provocation . . . What should be done to remove this terrible gangrene? Mr Booth suggests the State should provide the miserable creatures with food and lodging . . . but a far graver difficulty presents itself in the confirmed idleness to be thus assisted. They detest work, especially regular work; it is really extraordinary what sufferings many of them will accept sooner than try to earn an honest living . . .

The review continues in the same vein for several paragraphs. The same figures could be used in a completely different way to answer and confound the 'socialist agitators': 'very consoling facts may be accepted as proven by his figures. For instance, even in the poorest quarters of the capital those who are below the line of comfort do not number more than one third of the population' (*Standard*, 19 April 1889). What should be done with these 'loafers and criminals' living below 'the line of comfort' was perfectly clear to reviewers on the political right, and it was not to provide them with work, shelter and sustenance at State expense. As the *Saturday Review* (20 April 1889) expressed it: 'more good would be done in the long run, by a general hard-hearted determination to drive the weak into the workhouse and leave the idle to starve'.

Closer to the political centre Booth's work was seen as necessary reading for any social reformer, and his suggestion of industrial or labour colonies for Class B was reduced to an extension of the 'existing socialism of our Poor Law' (*Guardian*, 17 April 1889). The *Daily News* (16 April 1889) managed to describe the scheme without even mentioning labour colonies (Class B would be 'compelled to accept State Aid'), then noted 'It is Socialistic, but Mr Booth is not afraid of the word'. In a similar way the *Liverpool Review* (27 April 1889) termed it 'socialism for the residuum'. The notion of labour colonies was a large-scale solution to an even larger problem. Reviewers in the political

centre accepted it as worth discussion, for unlike their counterparts on the right they had no immediate answers themselves. For the *Liverpool Daily Post* (19 April 1889) it was 'a heroic suggestion', and the fact the Booth's proposal was 'Socialistic should not be an insuperable objection', according to the *Manchester Courier* (20 April 1889).

If the political right and centre were certain the labour colony scheme was socialistic, the Socialists were happy to accept it. Their reaction to labour colonies was welcoming, the journal *Today* (April 1889) regarded the plan as one which would 'send the old world spinning down the grooves of collectivist change with considerable impetus'. It is worth noting that the labour colony scheme which has been used in the late twentieth century to demonstrate Booth's 'conservatism' was not considered threatening in any way by most Socialist reviewers, nor did they react negatively to his work. For most of the Socialist newspapers *Life and Labour* was recommended as essential reading. *Christian Socialist* (August 1889) urged every reader to get it and 'digest it'. By the publication of the second volume in the spring of 1890 the *Pall Mall Gazette* published a drawing of Booth and in the accompanying editorial lionised him as a fact-finder leading public opinion. On the publication of the first volume the reviewers on the left went straight to Booth's poverty line and found the proportion 'proven' to be in poverty to be important news 'No less that 35 percent of the 909,000 . . . are in, or below, the "poor"' reported the *Labour Elector* (4 May 1889). The *Penny Illustrated Paper* (8 June 1889) pointed out 'with unquestionable authority . . . 300,000 people in London in a condition of chronic want'. This demonstrated, Booth's research 'ought to make an end of the current flippancies about drink, unthrift, and other easy and Pharisaic apologies for our social breakdown'. The *Pall Mall Gazette* (6 April 1889) quoted extensively from *Life and Labour*, especially from Booth's own descriptions of poverty, and found one sentence to be 'crucially important – 'The disease from which society suffers is the unrestricted competition in industry of the needy and the helpless.' The Socialists of 1889 saw Booth as an ally, though one they wished were more radical in the interpretation of his findings.

Beneath these squabbles of political interpretation were newspapers with special interests. *Christian World* (18 April 1889) reported Booth's findings and remarked especially on the moral lessons it taught: 'the evidence yielded during this inquiry as to the frequency of the wife being a drunkard and a slattern is very painful'. The *East London Advertiser* (27 April 1889) found in *Life and Labour* an answer to those who painted the East End as a dark sinkhole of vice. The statistics of income distribution and occupation were used to show that the great majority of East Enders lived and worked like their contemporaries elsewhere.

The two Jewish newspapers, the *Jewish Chronicle* and *Jewish World*, were most interested in Beatrice Potter's long essay on 'The Jewish Community'. Of all the reviews, those in the Jewish press were the most academically

critical. The *Jewish Chronicle* (19 April 1889; 26 April 1889) divided its review into three parts, the first placed Booth within the context of Mayhew and Stallard, pointing out the crucial difference of Booth's quantitative approach. There is a brief report in this first review on Potter's essay. The judgement is that it is a fair treatment if occasionally inconsistent. The second part uses all of *Life and Labour* to draw comparisons between the Jewish population and other East End residents, in these comparisons, as in *Life and Labour*, the Jews are shown in a favourable light. The final part of the review is a synopsis of Booth's findings with a number of the statistical tables reproduced. The *Jewish World* (19 April 89) felt Potter's essay 'must be the standard authority', 'Miss Beatrice Potter contributes an exceedingly able and scrupulously fair account of the Jewish community'. Their only criticism was that Potter's understanding of the Jews in Eastern Europe was 'rather faulty'. The *Jewish World* also published a detailed, two-part synopsis of Booth's findings.

In sum, though attacked as too socialistic by the right and not radical enough by the left, the general consensus was that Booth had made an important contribution to knowledge. Most reviewers accepted that Booth's aim 'has in the main been confined to showing how things are' (Booth 1889:592). Whatever their interpretation of the findings, virtually all reviewers accepted the findings as fact, and disseminated these facts widely. The repercussions of this dissemination are lost in questions of historical cause and effect, but the proliferation of social surveys in Britain and America after *Life and Labour* must owe something to this wide publicity. For some the newly emergent power of the social scientist was almost clairvoyant, as the *Evening Despatch* (18 April 1889) reported): 'Mr Booth (not to be confused with the distinguished military commander of the same name) . . . made close investigation over a district comprising nearly a million souls, not only into every house and every family, but *into every room and every person.*'

Political Uses of Booth's Research

The publication of *Life and Labour* in 1889, and the papers to the statistical society which preceded it, were part of a greater movement towards social reform and an increased recognition of the working class in politics in the 1880s and 1890s. It is worth looking at the influence *Life and Labour* had on these ongoing debates – specific questions of social policy can be considered in terms of how they demonstrate this influence.

Booth's research 'was only part of a whole series of investigations conducted in the 1880s to discover the working and living conditions of the working classes . . . and must be placed within the context of a decade of unrest, agitation, and re-evaluation of the fundamental structure of society' (Wohl 1997:220). In the 1870s and early 1880s Irish Home Rule was the premier political issue and one which brought about rapid shifts in

government, including the fall of the Gladstone government in the mid-1880s. Old political and social norms were under assault, and the passing of the Franchise Bill exacerbated these changes. The election of 1886 has been described as 'unsurpassed in importance of the issues, the confusion of the parties, and the sincerity of the combatants' (Lynd 1945:224). The Liberal Party as a destroyer of old evils was now disarmed, for a general shift towards greater state intervention was unsettling what had been the party of government. 'Old liberals' defected to the Conservatives – where individualist *laissez-faire* was preserved. The Liberal Party found itself rudderless, a collection of worthy causes – franchise, free education, supported housing – but without the fixed ideological will to carry these through. Sidney Webb (1889:64) was very optimistic but presenting one side of the Liberal dilemma when he wrote:

> The Liberal Party . . . with every approach towards democracy, becomes more markedly socialistic in character. The London Liberal and Radical Union, the official party organization in the metropolis . . . has lately in 1889 expressly promoted a measure to enable the London County Council to build unlimited artisans' dwellings, to be let at moderate rents, and to be paid for by a special tax, unrestricted in amount, to be levied on London landlords only. No more extreme 'socialistic' proposal could possibly be made, short of complete communism itself.

Webb's view was much more radical than most, but it is an indication of the rapidity of change swirling around Booth and his research in the 1880s. The sense of confusion which occurred when economic liberalism failed in its marriage to political democracy was pervasive. 'A new fear came to England, a new self-questioning,' writes Lynd (1945;414), for in the 1880s:

> poverty, unemployment, and the demands of the enfranchised people for better things were becoming insistent threats to confidence in self-adjusting processes and to established English ways of life. Planless international trade and planless economy within England – relying on 'natural law' . . . were becoming things of the past.

To resolve this confusion, to bring order to the 'planless economy', led to a number of answering strategies. Most of these were overtly political, from the deliberate attempts to influence and initiate legislation by the Fabians, to the more spontaneous Trafalgar Square riots. But one of these strategies was exemplified by Booth's research – 'a systematic accumulation of social facts which could not be avoided' (Lynd 1945:417). In the increasing attention paid to issues of social condition, social facts took on a new relevance. And in the increasing tide of pamphlets and facts, the empirical and apparently non-partisan reports made by Booth had special value.

The influence of Booth's research on political activity of the time is easy to assert, but very difficult to demonstrate. Actual political statements or acts which explicitly name the Poverty Survey as a starting point are not to be found. Hamilton (1932:95) states that initiation of the House of Lords Select Committee on Sweating (1888) was due to the publication of Booth's work.

Beatrice Potter gave extensive evidence to this committee, but a clear causal link between the Inquiry and the Committee is not apparent. Booth was also called to participate in the Registrar General's Committee which would guide the 1891 Census, and this was more likely due to the reputation he had gained after the publication of *Life and Labour* than to the badly received criticisms he had made of the Census in 1886. In many ways the influence of *Life and Labour* may be thought of as quietly powerful. Himmelfarb (1991: 164), in reviewing the legislation, local government debates and proposals that called on Booth's work explains that there were: 'frequent references to his work in books and articles, parliamentary debates and hearings. These are all the more revealing because they are so casual; his classes and statistics were referred to as if they were obvious, well-established facts'.

Some commentators, such as Webb and the Simeys (Simey and Simey 1960), also trace Booth's political influence through those members of his staff (see Bales 1995, for a description of Booth's research team) who went on to government positions. Llewellyn Smith, for example, went on to initiate and organise the State Labour Exchanges (1906–10), and the provision of unemployment insurance (1911–14). Ernest Aves worked in the establishment of minimum wage boards overseeing the 'sweated trades' from 1909, and later served in the government of New Zealand. Beatrice Webb is also a political figure whose early career was much influenced by Booth and her part in the Inquiry.

Beatrice Webb gives an account in *My Apprenticeship* (1926:247), which demonstrates the lack of specificity in the influence of the Inquiry on politics. Under the heading 'The Political Effect of the Grand Inquest', she sets out to discuss the effect on public opinion, politics and philanthropy of *Life and Labour*, and worries that she 'may easily overstate the political and administrative results'. According to Webb the results of the Inquiry 'came as a shock to the governing class', the 'philanthropist and politician were confronted with a million men, women and children in London alone, who were existing, at the best, on a family income of under 20s. a week'.

In Webb's estimation two further important issues were resolved by the Inquiry, firstly the belief that underpaid agricultural labourers swarmed into London and depressed wages, which was shown not to be true in Llewellyn Smith's contribution. Secondly, that a constant stream of aliens, especially Jews, to the East End were depressing wages and pressing upon the housing and livelihoods of the 'English' inhabitants. As it turned out there was actually only a 'relatively small annual increment' of Jews given that large numbers were merely passing through London on their way to America. More importantly, Webb sees in Booth's work the dismissal of 'the whole controversy between rival schools of poor relief and private charity' (1926:251). By demonstrating that neither the Poor Law Unions or the COS were able, after years of effort, to get at the roots of poverty, Webb perceives an ineluctable pressure for the ultimate adoption of socialist policies. In fact, by

Webb's accounting, Booth was foremost a proponent of moderate socialism. As evidence she offers his unqualified support of the London School Board, 'an organisation that was, in those very years, being hotly denounced as a form of socialism' (1926:253). Added to this was his proposal for labour colonies for Class B, of which Webb explains 'the magnitude and the daring of this piece of "Collectivism" was startling' (1926:254). When these proposals and findings are combined with Booth's work on behalf of old age pensions, Webb (1926:256) sees a key to the extension of state provision at the turn of the century:

> Thus we have the outcome of Charles Booth's poverty statistics, not indeed State provision for Class B as such, but State provision for the children of school age, State provision for those over seventy (and State provision for the blind over fifty), State provision for all those without employment (under unemployment insurance). Meanwhile, in the sphere of collective regulation, we have seen the repeated extensions of the Factory and Workshops, Mines and Merchant Shipping, Railways and Shop Hours Acts; and the far-reaching ramifications of minimum wage and maximum hours legislation. Indeed – perhaps being 'wise after the event – if I had to sum up, in a sentence, the net effect of Charles Booth's work, I should say that it was to give an entirely fresh impetus to the general adoption, by the British people, of what Fourier, three-quarters of a century before, had foreseen as the precursor of his organised communism, and had styled 'guaranteeism'; or, as we now call it, the policy of securing to every individual, as the very basis of his life and work, a prescribed national minimum of the requisites for efficient parenthood and citizenship. This policy may, or may not, be Socialism, but it is assuredly a decisive denial of the economic individualism of the 'eighties.

The idea that it was but a short step from Booth's work to the establishment of a welfare state is indubitably overstated. What is undeniable is that Booth's research findings altered the nature of political argument, and more than prompting specific actions contributed to a trend of basing new social policy on scientific study. Trevelyan wrote that the 'scientific study of the London poor . . . did much to enlighten the world and form opinion' (1931: 400). Canon Barnett expressed a similar view that the Inquiry prepared 'the public mind for reforms and for efforts' (1918:54). Hutchins and Harrison in their *History of Factory Legislation* (1911) point to the Inquiry as a stepping stone to legislation which 'weakened the superstition about individual liberty as no amount of socialist theory could have done' (1911:201). Seebohm Rowntree's study of poverty in York (1901) drew on Booth's example but made considerable improvements on his methods, and transformed a London question into a national issue. Beveridge recounts that as an undergraduate his Master at Balliol, Edward Caird, under Booth's influence, told him that the 'one thing that needs doing by some of you is to go and discover why, with so much wealth in Britain, there continues to be so much poverty, and how poverty can be cured' (1953:9). Well into the twentieth century Booth was often seen as a reformer and ally of the socialists, Longmate's *Socialist Anthology* (1953:95) describes him in this way:

> Charles Booth was not a Socialist, but the vast survey of the condition of the people of London . . . converted many to the cause. His work revealed that talk of poverty was not merely the propaganda of wild agitators, and also that only in state action could improvement be sought.

If specific instances of the influence of the Inquiry in legislation are hard to pin-point, with the exception of Booth's clear involvement in the campaign for universal pensions, it is certain that, as Fraser put it, the Inquiry 'provided the compelling statistical justification for a more collectivist policy' (1973:137).

Booth and Publicity

The transition to 'more collectivist' policies is a recognised watershed in British social and political history at the turn of the century. The establishment of the Royal Commission on the Poor Law in 1905 is often described as a pivotal event in this transition. In showing poverty to be a definable and, perhaps, correctable problem, Booth pointed towards a 'scientific' resolution – in much the same way as public-health reforms had reduced diseases like cholera. His criticism of the Poor Law was mild and oblique, but after ten years research Booth (1900:53) had to admit that:

> Tested by the condition of the people, it is not possible to claim any great improvement. The people are no less poor, nor much, if at all, more independent. There are fewer paupers, but not any fewer who rely on charity in some form. Private charity defies control, and the work of the Charity Organisation Society has, in spite of itself, become largely that of providing, under careful management, one more source of assistance for those who would otherwise be obliged to apply to the Guardians.

We find Booth to be a hinge upon which issues are turning. For Beatrice Webb and Norman Longmate he stands out as the harbinger of state socialism, yet Fraser places him 'at the end of an essentially Victorian tradition' (1973:137). Booth's works of 'conservative moralism' decried by modern historians (Brown 1968; Hennock 1976) were seen as required reading for radical socialists of the 1880s and 1890s. In some ways both of the earlier views of Booth are correct, and probably the least useful is the modern revisionist view that casts Booth as reactionary and conservative. Booth must be evaluated in his own historical context. Admittedly, Booth did not make an understanding of his position on political and social issues easy by aligning himself with particular groups or parties. His own orientation to social issues changed in some ways over his lifetime. Nor did the evolution of his ideas follow a uniform path. In some areas, such as his views on property, he became more conservative over time; in areas of social policy, such as public transport or income support for the elderly, he moved steadily to the left. He refused to accept a single over-arching explanatory paradigm from the political

left or right. Whether this is viewed positively or negatively, as an admirable analytical approach or a failure to achieve a breadth of vision, the result is the same: an understanding of Booth's position on any issue requires looking to his work on that issue. That said it should still be possible to extract communalities in Booth's thought.

But the central themes in Booth's approach were to do more with the *definition* of his social reality, than with ideological structures designed to alter that reality. At one level, his definition of poverty, and the proportion of the population which fell within poverty separates him from the left. Booth's concern for amelioration or change was not for the 'working class', a group by his reckoning much larger than the 'poor'. As Himmelfarb notes, 'Booth, like most of his contemporaries, persisted in thinking and speaking of the working classes in the plural; this was, indeed, the main point of his work' (1991:167). That separation and definition called for specific solutions to specific problems of poverty among particular groups of the population. Large-scale political change was not seen by Booth as either necessity or preference. Booth explained the separation in a paper read to the Political Economy Club in 1888:

> The force of labour considered as a class consists in the amount of its earnings, the regularity and value of its work. The force of the poor considered as a class consists in their poverty, in the irregularity of their work or the smallness of their earnings . . . There is no uniformity of interest and can be no uniformity of aim, any more than there is uniformity of social position, amongst the millions who fill up the ranks of poverty and labour.
>
> (Booth Archive, Mss. 797/II/29/2)

The young idealistic Booth who had denounced property as theft and railed against the cruelty and waste of poverty did not forsake his beliefs in latter life, but he did temper them. While he stood to the right of most Fabian policies he shared with them an emphasis on the pragmatic, and in this pragmatic orientation as a social scientist is an ideology which is often discounted in the attempt to place Booth politically.

Like Emile Durkheim, Booth derived from Comte a conception of social science as transcending political groupings. As Durkheim and Fauconnet wrote to the (British) Sociological Society: sociology 'is not there for its own sake, but because it alone can furnish the principle necessary for a complete systemisation of experience' (1905:259). If we understand Booth politically as a social scientist first and ideologue second, we come closest to explaining how his belief system would lead to the specific results it provided. For a person whose primary orientation was towards systemisation, a concentration on the illumination of social facts was more fruitful than pressing towards a pre-determined political explanation.

This elevation of the social fact to a role in politics is perhaps the most basic of the effects of the Inquiry on Booth's contemporaries. But the extension of

his work beyond the simple provision of facts proved to be much more difficult for Booth when the reputation he had made in research drew him more and more into the formulation of social policy. Another work altogether is required to explore the translation of Booth's complex political position into political expression through policy. But in his reaction to the publicity gained by his work, and in the parallel reactions of the press and public to Booth we see early lessons on the reflexive relations of social research, the press and the polity.

Note

1. This work is based on an analysis of the newspaper clippings held in the Booth Collection in the British Library of Political and Economic Science at the London School of Economics. This album of clippings is Volume 58 of Group A of the Booth holdings. Quoting from the guide to the collection.

   > Album (pp. 101) of press notices concerning Booth's: (a) 'Occupations of the People of the U.K., 1801–81' a paper read before the Statistical Society on 18 May 1886; excerpt printed 1886. pp. 85 (notices of 1882, pp. 1–2). (b) 'Conditions and occupations of the people of the Tower Hamlets, 1886–87;: paper read before the Statistical Society on 17 May 1887; printed 1887. pp. 69 (notices of 1887–8, pp. 3–7). (c) 'Condition and occupations of the people of East London and Hackney, 1887': paper read before Statistical Society on 15 May 1888 (notices of 1888, pp. 8–12). (d) *Labour and life of the people.* Vol. 1 *East London.* 1889 (notices of 1889, pp. 13–59). (e) *idem.* Vol. 2 *London contd.* Two vols. 1891 (notices of 1891, pp. 60–90). (f) *Life and labour of the people in London.* Nine vols. 1892–7. Vols. 1, 2, 3. 1892 – Vol. 4 1893 (notices of 1893, pp. 91–101).

   Virtually all of the notices studied for this paper are from the forty-six pages of notices relating to the publication of the *Labour and life of the people* in 1889 (Section d above). In selecting and analysing these I followed the usual qualitative analysis technique of simply reading all the notices several times and then re-reading with an eye to emergent themes while building a grid to lodge illustrative examples. The themes I report in the paper are those which emerged in this close reading, and the selection of excerpts for quotation are those which I felt best illustrated each theme. Other manuscript sources consulted were the Booth Archive at the Senate House Library, University of London, and the Passfield Papers (for the papers of Beatrice Webb) in the Archive of the British Library of Political and Economic Sciences, London.

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Biographical note: KEVIN BALES is Principal Lecturer in Sociology at the Roehampton Institute London. His own research conducted on behalf of charities and campaigning organisations in Britain has given him a taste of the potential for media 're-interpretation' of findings. His current research concerns the social and economic bases of modern slavery.

Address: School of Sociology & Social Policy, Roehampton Institute London, 80 Roehampton Lane, London SW15 5SL.