INTRODUCTION

On Monday, September 24th, 1849 *The Morning Chronicle* published an account of a visit to the cholera districts of Bermondsey — the first of a series of articles on the London poor by Henry Mayhew. The area he concentrated on was Jacob's Island, one of the few districts surviving the great fire of London; the island was surrounded by a tidal ditch which had become one vast open sewer and Mayhew described a part of the area as follows:

> We then journeyed on to London-street, down which the tidal ditch continues its course. In No. 1 of this street the cholera first appeared seventeen years ago, and spread up it with fearful virulence; but this year it appeared at the opposite end, and ran down it with like severity. As we passed along the reeking banks of the sewer the sun shone upon a narrow slip of the water. In the bright light it appeared the colour of a strong green tea, and positively looked as solid as black marble in the shadow — indeed it was more like watery mud than muddy water; and yet we were assured that this was the only water that the wretched inhabitants had to drink. As we gazed in horror at it, we saw drains and sewers emptying their filthy contents into it; we saw a whole tier of doorless privies in the open road, common to men and women, built over it; we heard bucket after bucket of filth splash into it, and the limbs of the vagrant boys bathing in it seemed, by pure force of contrast, white as Parian marble. And yet, as we stood doubting the fearful statement, we saw a little child, from one of the galleries opposite, lower a tin can with a rope to fill a large bucket that stood beside her. In each of the balconies that hung over the stream the same-self tub was to be seen in which the inhabitants put the mucky liquid to stand, so that they may, after it has rested a day or two, skim the fluid from the solid particles of filth, pollution and disease. As the little thing dangled her tin cup as gently as possible into the stream, a bucket of night soil was poured down from the next gallery.[1]

The impact of the article was considerable; as a result of it for example, Charles Kingsley and the Christian Socialists pressed for sanitary reform.[2] Mayhew's great skill lay in his ability to vividly recreate scenes and events encountered — we feel as we read his account that we are there in Bermondsey, seeing what he saw, 130 years ago. Mayhew also achieved the impact that he did through pioneering what we would now call oral history — or in his words, "the first attempt to publish the history of the people, from the lips of the people themselves."[3]

There was nothing new of course in the concern for the conditions under which the poor lived — "The Condition of England" question was long-standing, and had been probed and investigated since the beginning of the century in a series of medical, poor law and other government reports. Perhaps what was new was a sharpening of the concern of the propertied classes for the stability of the social order in which they so clearly had an overwhelming vested interest; *The Morning Chronicle* in its editorial, announcing the commencement of the national survey of labour and the poor, argued

> "the starving or mendicant state of a large portion of the people . . . if suffered to remain unremedied many years longer, will eat, like a dry rot, into the very framework of our society, and haply bring down the whole fabric with a crash."[4]

The Chartist agitation of the previous year had left its mark, and the "dangerous classes" is a phrase which appears frequently in *The Morning Chronicle* — although Mayhew only used it to rebut the assumptions and fears which it concealed. A secondary concern revealed by *The Morning Chronicle* editorial was the injustice of society as it was then constituted — "No man of feeling or reflection can look abroad without being shocked and startled by the sight of enormous wealth and unbounded luxury, placed in direct juxtaposition with the lowest extremes of indigence

and privation."[5] But again none of this was new — the middle class public had long been aware through novels as well as government reports of the existence of the poor — what *was* new was that a man of great sensitivity of language and feeling, was about to embark on one of the greatest surveys of human life ever undertaken, and this "factual" survey was to have an impact on contemporaries that no other writing on the poor had ever had. To understand how Mayhew achieved this impact is one of the aims of this introduction.

Mayhew himself claimed that he had been responsible for suggesting the national survey to *The Morning Chronicle*, but this was disputed by the newspaper in an editorial after Mayhew had broken with them.[6] Whatever the origin of the survey, Mayhew's first letter appeared in the newspaper on October 19th, 1849, and a series of eighty-two letters by him continued until December 12th, 1850. Just over a third of this material was incorporated in Mayhew's later study, *London Labour And The London Poor*, but the bulk of it has never been published (although selections have appeared in the last few years[7]). The survey covered many regions of England and Wales, and was divided between three types of area — the rural, manufacturing and metropolitan. Mayhew was appointed the metropolitan correspondent and he appears to have been helped by his brother "Gus", as well as by Charles Knight and Henry Wood, along with assistants, stenographers and general helpers.[8] It was Mayhew's contribution that soon attracted attention and the great majority of letters to the newspaper concerned his accounts of the London poor, rather than those on the countryside or industrial areas. Not only was there great general interest, but novelists of the day were clearly influenced by what they read — Charles Kingsley incorporated some of Mayhew's work into his novel *Alton Locke* and someone of the stature of Thackeray wrote in the March 1850 issue of *Punch:*

> "A clever and earnest-minded writer gets a commission from *The Morning Chronicle* newspaper, and reports upon the state of our poor in London; he goes amongst labouring people and poor of all kinds — and brings back what? A picture of human life so wonderful, so awful, so piteous and pathetic, so exciting and terrible, that readers of romances own that they never read anything like to it; and that the griefs, struggles, strange adventures here depicted exceed anything that any of us could imagine . . ."[9]

Mayhew achieved this effect on his readers by combining the survey side of his work with illustrations drawn from vivid individual autobiographical histories. It was this latter approach which gave his work such emotional force; people could identify for the first time with the poor, not just as depicted in a novel, but through the words of individuals whose lives were being laid out before the reader. No amount of statistical and official information on the poor could come near to Mayhew's work for emotional impact; he may have arrived at his method partly through his journalistic experience, but ironically, it was probably his adherence to natural science which led him to such a literal rendering of the evidence given to him by the people he interviewed. But also Mayhew understood the poor: there were elements in his character and experience which led him to sympathize and identify with them, as we will now see.

He was born in London in 1812 the son of a self-made solicitor, and was educated at Westminster Public School. The evidence we have suggests his father was both tyrannical and unsympathetic to all his children, particularly to his sons; he also appears to have been violent with his wife. Mayhew wrote a satire on his father, suggesting that he had a particular dislike for the front of respectability that his father presented to the world.[10] Although Mayhew appears to have been a brilliant pupil, his indolence and rebelliousness led him to leave the school at an early age; he refused to be flogged by the headmaster for a minor mis-

demeanour and immediately left the school never to return. Similarly, after a brief period of apprenticeship in his father solicitor's business, he caused his father some embarrassment by forgetting to lodge legal papers, and fled the house not to see his father for several years. Mayhew's brilliance, indolence and humour led him to adopt the life of a literary bohemian, writing for satirical magazines (he claimed to be one of the co-founders of *Punch*), newspapers, as well as his own plays, short stories and novels. Much of this writing had a radical edge which was probably linked with his reaction against the conservative respectability of his father, although his work was also characterized by some of the middle-class assumptions of the day, showing that he had not escaped the influence of his bourgeois background.[11]

One aspect of Mayhew's character which perhaps has not been sufficiently stressed in other commentaries on his work, was his interest in the natural sciences. According to one account, he had unsuccessfully tried to persuade his father to allow him to become an experimental chemist,[12] and when he left home, he spent much of his time on such experiments (he is reputed to have nearly blown up his brother's house on one occasion![13]), and his interest in natural science clearly informed the way he approached *The Morning Chronicle* survey. He wrote to the editor of that paper in February 1850 explaining his approach:

> I made up my mind to deal with human nature as a natural philosopher or a chemist deals with any material object; and, as a man who had devoted some little of his time to physical and metaphysical science, I must say I did most heartily rejoice that it should have been left to me to apply the laws of inductive philosophy for the first time, I believe, in the world to the abstract questions of political economy.[14]

Although this stress on science and political economy would seem a far cry from Mayhew the great originator of working class oral history, with all its moving and vivid writing, the

contradiction is not as great as it might seem. Mayhew always stressed he was presenting a *factual* picture of the London poor as he found them; when in dispute with the editor of *The Morning Chronicle* about the content of some of his articles — the editor had removed some passages antipathetic to free trade — Mayhew insisted that the original report of the speech of a boot-maker be restored on the grounds that he was "a person collecting and registering facts."[15] His notion of natural science was essentially that it was an inductive discipline, with factual information being collected in great detail before valid generalisations could be reached. It was partly on these grounds that he was critical of the political economists of the day; he believed that they constructed their theories without familiarizing themselves with the complexities of the situations they were trying to explain.

An obvious weakness in Mayhew's method was that he did not use a strict process of random sampling in selecting informants — his work was carried out before this had been developed — but he did attempt wherever possible to avoid undue bias. This is illustrated by the dispute that arose over the reliability of his evidence on Ragged Schools; his assistant R. Knight gave the following account of the method of selecting informants in a letter to *The Morning Chronicle:*

> I was directed by your Special Correspondent to obtain for him the addresses of some of the boys and girls who attended the Ragged School in Westminster, so that he might be able to visit them at their homes. Your correspondent desired me to take the names of the first parties that came to hand, so that neither particularly good nor bad cases might be selected, but such as might be presumed to be fair average examples of the practical tendency of the school in question.[16]

Mayhew comes near here to a random sampling method, but elsewhere he was too dependent on special sources of information to be able to achieve this aim. Frequently

he used key informants — doctors, clergymen, trade union leaders — to both provide information on a subject and introduce him to other informants in the area that he was interested in. The disadvantages and potential bias in this method is obvious, but in practice it seems to have been remarkably successful. All of Mayhew's key informants appear to have been intelligent and well-informed men, and were able to provide him with a range and depth of information that would have been unavailable elsewhere (this is perhaps a method that social scientists today might benefit from rediscovering). A check on the reliability and objectivity of the information given was the public nature of the survey — errors were open to correction through the letter column of the newspaper, and that there were only one or two corrections of this kind,[17] bears testimony to the high overall accuracy of Mayhew's work.

The major theme of the survey was of course poverty, and an introduction of this kind can only touch upon some of the more important aspects of the subject as it was treated by Mayhew. One of the things that he revealed to his contemporaries was the complexity of poverty, as well as its inevitability. Anything which could destroy a family's ordinary means of livelihood — illness, old age, death or accident — could throw it into the most extreme and abject poverty. I quote at some length the following account given to Mayhew of what happened to a coalwhipper (a labourer unloading coal) after an accident:

> I was a coalwhipper. I had a wife and two children. Four months ago, coming off my day's work, my foot slipped, and I fell and broke my leg. I was taken to the hospital, and remained there ten weeks. At the time of the accident I had no money at all by me, but was in debt by the amount of ten shillings to my landlord. I had a few clothes of myself and wife. While I was in the hospital I did not receive anything from our benefit society, because I had not been able to keep up my subscription. My wife and children lived, while I was in hospital, by pawning my things, and going from door to

door, to every one she knowed, to give her a bit. The men who worked in the same gang as myself made up 4s. 6d. for me, and that, with two loaves of bread that they had from the relieving-officer, was all they got. While I was in the hospital, the landlord seized for the rent the few things that my wife had not pawned, and turned her and my two little children into the street — one was a boy three years old, and the other a baby just turned ten months. My wife went to her mother, and she kept her and my little ones for three weeks, till she could do so no longer. My mother, poor old woman, was most as bad off as we were. My mother only works on the ground — out in the country at gardening. She makes about 7s. a week in summer, and in the winter she only has only 9d. a day to live upon; but she had at least a shelter for her child, and she willingly shared that with her daughter and daughter's children. She pawned all the clothes she had to keep them from starving — but at last everything was gone from the poor old woman, and then I got my brother to take my family in. My brother worked at garden work, the same as my mother-in-law did. He made about 15s. a week in summer, and about half that in the winter time . . . He had only one room, but he got in a bundle of straw for me, and we lived and slept there for seven weeks. He got credit for more than £1 of bread, and tea, and sugar for us; and now he can't pay, and the man threatens to summon him for it. After I left my brother's, I came to live in the neighbourhood of Wapping, for I thought I might manage to do a day's work at coalwhipping, and I couldn't bear to live on his little earning any longer — he could scarcely keep himself then. At last I got a ship to deliver, but I was too weak to do the work, and in pulling at the ropes, my hand got sore, and festered for want of nourishment . . . After this I was obliged to lay up again, and that's the only job of work that I have been able to do for this last four months . . . I had one pennyworth of bread this morning. We altogether had half-a-quatern loaf among the four of us, but no tea nor coffee. Yesterday we had some bread, and tea, and butter, but wherever my wife got it from I don't know. I was three days, but a short time back, without a taste of food (here he burst out crying). I had nothing but water which passed my lips. I had merely a little at home, and that my wife and children had. I would rather starve myself than let them do so. Indeed, I've done it over and over again. I never

> begged. I'd die in the streets first. I never told nobody of my life. The foreman of my gang was the only one besides God that knew of my misery; and his wife came to me and brought me money and brought me food; and himself too, many a time ("I had a wife and five children of my own to maintain, and it grieved me to my heart," said the man who sat by, "to see them want, and I unable to do more for them.")[18]

Anyone tempted to dismantle the welfare state would do well to ponder this passage at some length; there is no doubt whatsoever from the voluminous evidence produced by Mayhew and the other correspondents of *The Morning Chronicle*, that this man's experience of what happened in sickness and ill-health was entirely typical. It is not only the extreme poverty of the family itself, but the poverty of their neighbours, workmates and relatives which gives the report such importance in revealing the terrible conditions under which the poor of Victorian England lived. The harshness with which the family were treated by the landlord and the relieving officer obviously added considerably to their misery; only the support of neighbours, workmates and above all, relatives, enabled them to survive at all.

Mayhew makes it very clear that these cases were not merely examples of individual distress, but were characteristic of whole classes of people. Poverty of this kind was the result of structural changes in society, a theme which became Mayhew's over-riding concern in his *Morning Chronicle* letters. He analysed the poverty resulting from changes in the organisation of trades, and began to generalise this into an indictment of the whole of capitalist society. Before he embarked on this analysis, he gathered together a vast amount of empirical evidence on the incidence and nature of poverty, and perhaps what was so unusual about this, was his ability to write so well about what other authors had managed to make so mundane and boring; here is his description of the hiring of labourers in the docks:

> As the foreman calls from a book the names, some men jump upon the backs of the others, so as to lift themselves high above the rest, and attract the notice of him who hires them. All are shouting. Some cry aloud his surname, some his christian name; others call out their own names, to remind him that they are there. Now the appeal is made in Irish blarney, now in broken English. Indeed it is a sight to sadden the most callous, to see *thousands* of men struggling for only one day's hire, the scuffle being made the fiercer by the knowledge that hundreds out of the number assembled must be left to idle the day out in want. To look in the faces of that hungry crowd is to see a sight that must be ever remembered.[19]

He went on to detail the poverty of the dock labourers, and illustrated this in brilliant fashion through interviews with individual dockers and their families — families that lived in one squalid, unheated and virtually unfurnished room, who were frequently subject to hunger and illness, without proper clothing — children without shoes and socks — and could only find work if they were prepared to participate in the scramble described above. Many of the people seeking dock work had previously been silk-weavers living and working in the Spitalfields area; the drastic decline in the prosperity in this trade was delineated by Mayhew in one of his first letters.[20]

Although silk-weaving was the most dramatic example of an occupation falling into destitution, most of the trades covered by Mayhew were subject to something of the same process. Real wages fell amongst nearly all occupational groups, and *The Morning Chronicle* survey provides an unrivalled series of economic histories of various trades from the late eighteenth century onwards. Workers in the shoe- and boot-making trade had suffered severely in living standards since the prosperity of the Napoleonic wars, as was revealed by one of Mayhew's informants:

> In 1812 the boot-makers received their highest wages. If an average could have been taken then of the earnings of the

> trade, one with another, I think it would have been about 35s. a man. The great decrease (from 35s. to 13s. 6d. a week) that has taken place is not so much owing to the decrease of wages as to the increase of hands, and the consequent decrease of work coming to each man. I know myself that my late master used to earn £2 a week on average many years back, but of late years I am sure he has not made 15s. a week.[21]

Mayhew unfortunately did not collect systematic information on changes in prices — the evidence he did publish suggests that prices only begun to fall significantly after the mid-1840's. But the qualitative evidence on living standards more than outweighs this deficiency. Here is a description of a boot-maker's earnings and style of life in the early years of the century:

> I got work in Mr. Hoby's . . . not long after the battle of Waterloo, in 1815, and was told by my fellow workmen that I wasn't born soon enough to see good times; but I've lived long enough to see bad ones. Though I wasn't born soon enough, as they said I could earn, and did earn £150 a year, something short of £3 a week; and that for eight years when trade became not so good . . . I could then play my £1 a corner at whist. I *wouldn't* play at that time for less than 5s. I could afford a glass of wine, but was never a drinker; and for all that, I had my £100 in the Four per Cents for a long time (I lent it to a friend afterwards), and from £40 to £50 in the savings bank. Some made more than me, though I *must* work. I can't stand still. One journeyman, to my knowledge, saved £2,000; he once made 34 pairs of boots in three weeks. The bootmen then at Mr. Hoby's were all respectable men; they were like gentlemen — smoking their pipes in their frilled shirts, like gentlemen — all but the drunkards. At the trade meetings, Hoby's best men used to have one corner of the room to themselves, and were called the House of Lords. There was more than one hundred of us when I became one; and before then there were an even greater number. Mr. Hoby has paid five hundred pounds a week in wages. It was easy to save money in those days; one could hardly help it. We shall never see the like again.[22]

Contrast this with the life-style of a boot-closer who

> assured me that he had dealt with his baker for fourteen or fifteen years and had never been able to get out of debt lately . . . As for a coat, he said, "Oh, God bless my soul, sir, I haven't bought one for this six or seven years, and my missus has not been able to purchase a gown for the same time; to do so out of my earnings *now* is impossible. If it wasn't for a cousin of mine that is in place, we shouldn't have a thing to our backs, and working for the best wages too . . . Wages have been going down ever since 1830. Before that time my wife attended to her domestic duties only . . . Since that period my wife has been obliged to work at shoe-binding, and my daughter as well . . . My comforts have certainly not increased in proportion with the price of provisions. In 1811 to 1815 bread was very high — I think about 1s. 10½d. the best loaf — and I can say I was much more comfortable then than at present. I had a meat dinner at that time every day, but now I'm days without seeing the sight of it. If provisions were not as cheap as they are now we should be starving outright . . ."[23]

These were men who worked in the "honourable" part of the trade — working on the premises of their employer for fixed hours, their conditions of work regulated by agreement with their trade union. Although increasingly impoverished by the fall in wages, their situation was much better than that of people working in the "dishonourable" sector — those who either worked for themselves as "chamber masters" in their own homes, or were employed by them. This sector was strongly concentrated in the east end of London, whereas the more respectable part of the trade were concentrated mainly in the west end. This polarisation of the trades — with about ten per cent "honourable" and ninety per cent "dishonourable" — was revealed by Mayhew to be common in the London trades. He summarized the markedly different life-styles of the two groups and illustrated it with reference to the tailoring trade:

> The very dwellings of the people are sufficient to tell you the wide difference between the two classes. In the one you occa-

> sionally find small statues of Shakespeare beneath glass shades; in the other all is dirt and foetor. The working tailor's comfortable first-floor at the West-end is redolent with the perfume of the small bunch of violets that stand in the tumbler over the mantel-piece; the sweater's wretched garret is rank with the stench of filth and herrings. The honourable part of the trade are really intelligent artisans, while the slopworkers are generally almost brutified with their incessant toil, wretched pay, miserable food, and filthy homes.[24]

The sweating system at its worst could be highly dangerous to health and life, as was revealed by someone who had worked for one:

> One sweater I worked with had four children, six men, and they, together with his wife, sister-in-law, and himself, all lived in two rooms, the largest of which was about eight feet by ten. We worked in the smallest room and slept there as well — all six of us. There were two turn-up beds in it, and we slept three in a bed. There was no chimney, and indeed no ventilation whatever. I was near losing my life there . . . Almost all the men were consumptive, and I myself attended the dispensary for disease of the lungs.[25]

What had brought about the terrible mass of misery and poverty that week after week filled *The Morning Chronicle's* pages? The answer of the political economists of the day was that it was largely due to an over-rapid expansion of population, and it was this Malthusian orthodoxy that Mayhew was most concerned to dispute. He did not contest that an over-supply of labour would lead to a fall in wages and living standards, but criticized the Malthusian conclusion on empirical grounds. In his later work *London Labour And The London Poor,* he argued that there had been no excessive increase in population in the first half of the nineteenth century, stating that the demand for labour as measured by various output/production series, had more than kept pace with population increase.[26] He did not seem to realise that this contradicted his own findings about the increasing poverty of the mass

of the people, although he could have saved part of his argument by stressing the re-distribution of income from poor to rich. The re-distribution would have had to have been very dramatic to account for the depth of poverty he found in his survey, and there is no evidence that it ever reached this scale. The major problem with Mayhew's argument is that he used production series for commodities such as cotton and wool, which are known to have expanded very dramatically, the textile industry being central to the industrial revolution then taking place. The standard of living and how it changed in this period has of course become a subject of extensive scholarly debate, but this does not appear to be resolvable with existing statistical data. Mayhew's own detailed qualitative evidence seems much more useful in telling us what was happening at this time, and the conclusion from his survey must be that there was a vast increase in poverty during the first half of the nineteenth century.

How are we to reconcile the above conclusion with some of the statistical series on wages which appear to contradict it? The answer lies I believe in what the bootmaker told Mayhew in the interview quoted previously — that it was not so much a fall in wage rates of existing trades that was responsible, but a significant decrease in the amount of employment available and the growth of sweated work practices outside of the recognized (and presumably the statistically measured) regular trades. Mayhew himself stated that "in the generality of trades the calculation is that one-third of the hands are fully employed, one-third partially, and one-third unemployed throughout the year."[27] This would seem to bring the analysis back to an over-supply of labour and an excessively expanding population, but Mayhew had a series of detailed arguments based on his empirical findings with which to counter this thesis. For him the surplus of labour was the result of the competitiveness of contemporary capitalist society, and he brought

this out in a number of separate but related themes. He recognized that the introduction of new technology had a significant impact on the creation of surplus labour; for example, he described in some detail the effect of steam machinery on the employment of sawyers and how it had both reduced their numbers and income.[28] But the effect of the new technology was very limited in London as most industries were labour-intensive; what Mayhew did trace however was the impact of the industrial revolution of the textile industry in Lancashire, for some of the labour displaced found its way on to the London labour market. One man who had become destitute gave Mayhew the following account of his life:

> "I am thirty-eight" he said, "and have been a cotton-spinner, working at Chorlton-upon-Medlock. I can neither read nor write. When I was a young man, twenty years ago, I could earn £2 10s. clear money every week, after paying two piecers and a scavenger. Each piecer had 7s. 6d. a week — they are girls; the scavenger — a boy to clean the wheels of the cotton spinning machine had 2s. 6d. I was master of them wheels in the factory. This state of things continued until about the year 1837. I lived well and enjoyed myself, being a hearty man, noways a drunkard, working every day from half-past five in the morning till half-past seven at night — long hours that time, master. I didn't care about money as long as I was decent and respectable. I had a turn for sporting at the wakes down there. In 1837 the 'self-actors' (machines with steam power) had come into common use. One girl can mind three pairs — that used to be three men's work — getting 15s. for the work which gave three men £7 10s. Out of one factory 400 hands were flung in one week, men and women together. We had a meeting of the union, but nothing could be done, and we were told to go and mind the three pairs, as the girls did, for 15s. a week. We wouldn't do that. Some went for soldiers, some to sea, some to Stopport (Stockport), to get work in factories where the self-actors wer'nt agait."[28]

The Luddite reaction to new technology becomes completely understandable, its beneficiaries at this time being almost entirely the owners of factories and their like. The

sawyers had destroyed the first mechanical mills in London (these were run by horse-power but on the same principle as the later steam mills), but had eventually succumbed to the new technology.

Mayhew realized however that technology was not the prime moving force in the early capitalist transformation of society, at least in the London area. Much more important was the "extraction of labour-surplus" through changes in the organisation of what Marx called the social relationships of production — in particular the development of petty capitalism in various forms. Mayhew did not of course analyse the course of events in such simple analytical terms; he gave a much more descriptive account of what he called the effects of the "competitive system". He analysed the increase of surplus labour under two headings: the increase in the number of labourers and the increase in the amount of labour extracted from an existing labour force. He saw six ways of increasing the number of labourers: "(1) By the undue increase of apprentices. (2) By drafting into the ranks of labour those who should be otherwise engaged, as women and children. (3) By the importation of labourers from abroad. (4) By the migration of country labourers to towns, and so overcrowding the market in the cities. (5) By the depression of other trades. (6) By the undue increase of the people themselves."[29] Three, four and six are all direct effects of increasing population and belong if you like to the "opposition argument". One and two form a part of Mayhew's main argument (five is rather nebulous), although he does not spell this out. He grouped the means of increasing the amount of labour from a fixed labour force under seven headings: "(1) By extra supervision when the workmen are paid by the day . . . (2) By increasing the workman's interest in his work; as in piece work, where the payment of the operative is made proportional to the quantity of work done by him . . . (3) By large quantities of work given out at one time; as in 'lump-work' and 'contract

work'. (4) By the domestic system of work, or giving out materials to be made up at the homes of the workpeople. (5) By the middleman system of labour. (6) By the prevalence of small master. (7) By a reduced rate of pay, as forcing operatives to labour both longer and quicker, in order to make up the same amount of income."[30] Many of these headings overlap as Mayhew himself was prepared to admit; categories two to six all have a strong element of increasing the capitalist principle into work situations, and in practice the prevalence of the contract system and in particular the growth of small masters (petty capitalists) seem to have been most important, at least in Mayhew's work. Headings one and seven concern the control that employers were able to exert over their work force, without having to go through indirect market forces (the distinction between employer and employee becomes blurred of course in the case of the small master — a more appropriate distinction here would be between the rich capitalist and the poor worker who actually provided the labour, under whatever relationship of production).

That employers were able to extract enormous amounts of extra labour through direct control was brought out by Mayhew in a number of places; perhaps the most striking example was the "strapping system" in the carpentry and joinery trade:

> Concerning this I received the following extraordinary account from a man after his heavy day's labour; and never in all my experience have I seen so bad an instance of over-work. The poor fellow was so fatigued that he could hardly rest in his seat. As he spoke he sighed deeply and heavily, and appeared almost spirit-broken with excessive labour: — "I work at what is called the strapping shop," he said, "and have worked at nothing else for these many years past in London. I call 'strapping', doing as much work as a human being or a horse possibly can in a day, and that without any hanging upon the collar, but with the foreman's eyes constantly fixed upon you, from six o'clock in the morning to six o'clock at night. The shop in which I work is for all the world like a prison — the

> silent system is as strictly carried out there as in a model gaol. If a man was to ask any common question of his neighbour, except it was connected with his trade, he would be discharged there and then. If a journeyman makes the least mistake, he is packed off just the same. A man working in such places is almost always in fear; for the most trifling things he is thrown out of work in an instant . . . I suppose since I knew the trade a man does four times the work that he did formerly . . . What's worse than that, the men are everyone striving one against the other . . . They are all tearing along from the first thing in the morning to the last thing at night, as hard as they can go, and when the time comes to knock off they are ready to drop. I was hours after I got home last night before I could get a wink of sleep; the soles of my feet were on fire, and my arms ached to that degree that I could hardly lift my hand to my head."[31]

The result of this terrible exploitation of labour was that many joiners were "quite old men and gray with spectacles on, by the time they are forty."[32]

It is easy now to understand current trade union practices which regulate and control the amount of work to be done independently of the "logic of production." Trade unions were of course active during the whole of the nineteenth century and we must ask why they were unable to prevent the extreme conditions described above. This is perhaps the crucial question that Mayhew never answered in his discussion of *political-economy*, yet the answer to such a question is to be found in his own survey. Unions had been very active in the protection of living standards and working conditions, even when they had not achieved legal recognition. One boot-maker described the strike of 1812 which resulted in victory for the union:

> The masters, at that time, after holding out for thirteen weeks, gave way, yielding to all the demands of the men. "The *scabs* had no chance in those days," said my informant, "the wages men had it all their own way; they could do anything, and there were no slop shops then. Some scabs went to Mr. Hoby 'occasioning' (that is asking whether he 'had occasion for another hand'), but he said to them. 'I can do nothing; go to

> my masters (the journeymen) in the Parr's Head, Swallow-street' (the sign of the public-house used by the men that managed the strike)."[33]

The key to the success of unions at this time was provided by another of Mayhew's informants:

> I believe the reduction of wages in our trade is due chiefly to the supra-abundance of workmen; that is the real cause of our prices having gone down, because when men are scarce, or work is plentiful, they *will* have good wages. From the year 1798 our wages began to increase partly because the number of hands was decreased by war, and partly because the foreign orders were much greater then than now.[34]

After the Napoleonic wars labour flooded back onto the market, and with population doubling in the first half of the nineteenth century, the supply of labour greatly began to exceed its demand. This of course is a highly complex question, much debated by economists, sociologists and historians, the critical element in the debate being the balance between supply and demand for labour, and its relationship with the distribution of real resources within an early capitalist economy. Another boot-maker put this very simply when he told Mayhew:

> The cause of the trade being so overstocked with hands is, I believe, due in great measure to the increase of population. Every pair of feet there is born, certainly wants a pair of shoes; but unfortunately, as society is at present constituted, they cannot get them. The poor, you see, sir increase at a greater rate than the rich.[35]

Several of Mayhew's artisan informants showed a remarkably good grasp of basic economics, and one or two even anticipated Marx and Keynes in their understanding of the effects of under-consumption on the capitalist economy. One man believed in particular that the new technology would have disastrous effects on the economy:

> Suppose, I say, that *all* human labour is done away by it, and the working men are turned into paupers and criminals, then what I want to know is who are to be the customers of the

> capitalists? The capitalists themselves, we should remember, spend little or none (comparatively speaking) of the money *they* get; for, of course, it is the object of every capitalist to save all he can, and so increase the bulk of money out of which he makes his profits. The working men, however, spend *all* they receive — it's true a small amount is put into the savings bank, but that's a mere drop in the ocean; and so the working classes constitute the great proportion of the customers of the country. The lower their wages are reduced of course the less they have to spend, and when they are entirely superseded by machinery, of course they'll have nothing at all to spend, and then, I ask again, who are to be the capitalists' customers?[36]

These dire predictions did not come to full realization in the hundred years or so after they were made, and this was partly because the industrial revolution had brought about an improvement of average living standards after the 1840's, mainly through a fall in prices. A number of informants told Mayhew how the fall in prices of bread, meat, fruit and vegetables, clothing and other goods, had improved their lot from the mid-1840's onwards, and this was due to a number of factors — new technology, railways, more efficient farming — and undoubtedly this development was the great turning point in the history of capitalism. There were of course many other factors that prevented the pauperization of the working classes predicted by Marx — perhaps one of the most important being the development of specialization and the growth of the division of labour, which enabled the labour force through their unions to exploit the dependency of employers on small numbers of key workers. At the time that Mayhew wrote however, there was little evidence of this development, and the unions were weak and the mass of the population in a pauperized state.

What Mayhew failed to realize was the importance of the rate of expansion of the population for the conditions under which the struggle between capital and labour was conducted. (I assume here that population was expanding

for other than economic reasons, and was primarily a function of medical and other non-economic factors.[37]) Throughout his survey there is constant mention of a massive surplus of labour demanding work which was not there to be had;[38] this enabled employers to ruthlessly crush strikes and union activity, either by employing blackleg labour, or by sending work into non-unionized sectors and areas of the country. What Mayhew did realize was that this surplus of labour enabled employers to extract even further surpluses through the modes of exploitation discussed above — formulated by Mayhew in the phrase, "Over-work makes under-pay, and under-pay makes over-work."[39] A surplus of population did not operate in a vacuum, it was employed within a certain social relationship of production, and this could be crucial for the development of the economy. In the case of London during the middle of the nineteenth century, it was the growth of petty-capitalism that was crucial. This took many guises — sub-contracting, chamber-masters, sweaters, etc. — but the critical development was the exploitation of labour through a system of production which gave workers a personal but minimal interest in profitability.

A cabinet-maker gave the following explanation of why so many men became small capitalists working on their own account:

> One of the inducements . . . for men to take for making up for themselves is to get a living when thrown out of work until they can hear of something better . . . Another of the reasons for the men turning small masters is the little capital that it requires for them to start themselves . . . Many works for themselves, because nobody else won't employ them, their work is so bad. Many weavers has took to our business of late . . . Another reason for men turning little masters is because employment's more certain like that way; a man can't be turned off easily, you see, when he works for himself. Again, some men prefer being small masters because they are more independent like; when they're working for themselves, they can begin working when they please, and knock off when-

> ever they like. But the principal reason is because there ain't enough work at the regular shops to employ them all.[40]

These small masters were drawn into a system of ruthless competition, and the money paid to them by the warehouses — the "slaughterers" — became barely sufficient for subsistence. Many of the chamber-masters were sweaters, employing their wives and children and any other source of cheap labour, but none of them were real beneficiaries from the long and grinding hours of work — it was the owners of the warehouses and their customers who really gained from this system of exploitation. The major reason why so many small masters were prepared to tolerate these conditions was because there was no alternative — a surplus of labour through a rapidly-expanding population had thrown them out of regular work and into pauperized independence, which in turn helped destroy the power of the trade unions in the "honourable" sector of the trade.

Although Mayhew failed to link population growth with the changes in the structure of the social relationships of production which he so effectively described, he provided in his survey nearly all that we would want to know to understand the development of contemporary capitalism. However, his survey went well beyond the confines of this major theme, and to the sociologist, his work provides a range of fascinating detail on other sociological subjects. One theme that constantly recurs is the growth of a culture of respectability during the nineteenth century, a subject which obviously fascinated Mayhew. There are frequent mentions in the survey of the decline in drunkenness and brutality which characterized many English workmen of an earlier epoch; here is Mayhew's interview with a cabinet-maker on the subject of respectability:

> "Within my recollection," said an intelligent cabinet-maker, "there was much drinking, among the cabinet-makers. This was fifteen years back. Now I am satisfied that at least seven-eighths of all who are in society are sober and temperate men.

> Indeed, good masters won't have tipplers now-a-days." . . . The great majority of the cabinet-makers are married men, and were described to me by the best informed parties as generally domestic men, living, whenever it was possible, near their workshops, and going home to every meal. They are not much of play-goers, a Christmas pantomime or any holiday spectacle being exceptions, especially where there is a family. "I don't know a card-player," said a man who had every means of knowing, "amongst us, I think you'll find more cabinet-makers than any other trade members of mechanics' institutes and literary institutions and attenders of lectures." Some journeymen cabinet-makers have saved money, and I found them all speak highly of the advantages they, as well as their masters, derive from their trade society.[41]

These respectable artisans were of course only a minority of the total of working people; we saw earlier how the members of the "honourable" west end trade lived very different lives to those of the east end. The respectable artisans were family men, living quiet private lives, markedly in contrast with the life of the "rough" working class, which was violent, noisy and gregarious. Mayhew had a deeply ambivalent attitude towards respectability; on the one hand he admired the "rational" sobrietry, cleanliness and cultured life-style of his intelligent artisans, yet on the other was greatly attracted to the spontaneity and colour of his street folk, vagabonds, delinquents, labourers and other unrespectable inhabitants of London. The intelligence of the respectable artisan enabled him to take an active interest in union and political matters, whereas the unskilled workmen tended to passively acquiese in the miseries of his lot:

> The transition from the artisan to the labourer is curious in many respects. In passing from the skilled operative of the West End to the unskilled workman of the Eastern quarter of London, the moral and intellectual change is so great that it seems as if we were in a new land and among another race. The artisans are sufficiently educated and thoughtful to have a sense of their importance in the state . . . The unskilled labourers are a different class of people. As yet they are as unpolitical as footmen. Instead of entertaining violently demo-

> cratic opinions, they appear to have no political opinions whatever — or, if they do possess any, they rather lean towards the maintenance "of things as they are," than towards the ascendancy of the working people.[42]

Not only were the unskilled unpolitical, but they tended to be more addicted to violence, drunkenness and dishonesty than the rest of the population, Mayhew finding from official statistical returns of crime that the labourers of London were "nine times as dishonest, five times as drunken, and nine times as savage, as the rest of the community."[43]

What Mayhew most disliked about the unrespectable however was the dirt and squalor in which they lived; in discussing the importance of fish in the diet of the poor — the railway had ushered in an era of very cheap fish in London — he wrote:

> The rooms of the very neediest of our needy metropolitan population, always smell of fish; most frequently of herrings. So much so, indeed, that to those, like myself, have been in the habit of visiting their dwellings, the smell of herrings, even in comfortable houses, savours from association, so strongly of squalor and wretchedness as to be often most oppressive.[44]

This echoes the passage quoted earlier, which contrasted the west end tailor's comfortable apartment with flowers and pictures, and "the sweater's wretched garret . . . rank with the stench of filth and herrings." Mayhew believed that the poor of the east end were "brutified with their incessant toil, wretched pay, miserable food, and filthy homes", and in a number of places in his survey he uses strong moral language to condemn what he considered to be the vices of the unrespectable poor. Listen to the following account of the lives of pickpockets and note the mixture of moral disapproval and insightful sociological and psychological analysis:

> It is a singular fact that as a body the pickpockets are generally very sparing of drink. My informant never knew

> any one of these young pickpockets or "gonoffs" to be drunk, or to seem in any way anxious for drink. They are mostly libidinous, indeed universally so, and spend whatever money they can spare upon the low prostitution round about the neighbourhood . . . Nor can their vicious propensities be ascribed to ignorance, for we have seen that out of 55 individuals 40 could read and write, while four could read . . . Neither can the depravity of their early associations be named as the cause of their delinquencies for we have seen that, as a class, their fathers are men well to do in the world. Indeed their errors seem to have rather a physical than either an intellectual or moral cause. They seem to be naturally of an erratic and self-willed temperament, objecting to the restraints of home, and incapable of continuous application to any one occupation whatsoever. They are essentially the idle and the vagabond; and they seem generally to attribute the commencement of their career to harsh government at home.[45]

Much of this account could be applied to Mayhew himself — his own reaction against parental authority, his "erratic and self-willed temperament", and his restlessness. Although current sociological fashion is against the kind of physiological explanation of delinquency given by Mayhew, there is probably as much evidence in its favour as with rival more widely accepted theories.

The delinquents were rebels, but rebels with energy, intelligence, humour and a love of life. It is these qualities which inform some of Mayhew's best-known work, the writing on street entertainers, costermongers, tricksters and the host of other colourful characters which fill his pages. Listen to the marvellous account of one of the many tricks played on a gullible public:

> I've done *the shivering dodge* too — gone out in the cold weather half naked. One man has practised it so much that he can't get off shivering now. Shaking Jemmy went on with his shivering so long that he couldn't help it at last. He shivered like a jelly — like a calf's foot with the ague — on the hottest day in summer.[46]

And some of Mayhew's characters are so close in language to Dickens, that the reader finds himself unconsciously carried

from one to the other. One of the Punch and Judy men told Mayhew:

> One of my pardners was buried by the workhouse; and even old Pike, the most noted showman as ever was, died in the workhouse. Pike and Porsini — Porsini was the first original street Punch, and Pike was his apprentice — their names is handed down to prosperity among the noblemen and footmen of the land. They both died in the workhouse, and, in course, I shall do the same. Something else *might* turn up, to be sure. We can't say what this luck of the world is. I'm obliged to strive wery hard — wery hard indeed, sir — now, to get a living, and then not get it after all at times — compelled to go short often.[47]

The comic quality of the language conceals of course the real suffering of the street performers — Mayhew met a street clown on the verge of starvation, minutes afterwards transformed into an apparently happy and laughing performer[48] — but their human quality shines through their sufferings, and there is almost something moving in the quaintness of their language.

Mayhew was acutely aware of how sociological factors influenced the adoption of respectability or its opposite; he gave a great deal of space for example to the effects of the system of paying wages in public-houses to men working in the coal-unloading trade. For many years it had led to widespread drunkenness and brutality — many men beating their wives because of disputes over the spending of money on drink — and Mayhew summarized the effects of the system in the following passage:

> The children of the coalwhippers were almost reared in the tap-room, and a person who had great experience in the trade tells me he knew as many as 500 youths who were transported, and as many more who met with an untimely death. At one house there were forty young robust men employed about seventeen years ago, and of these are only two living at present. My informant tells me that he has frequently seen as many as 100 men at one time fighting pell-mell at King James's stairs, and the publican standing by to see fair play.[49]

Similarly amongst dockers the irregularity of work and income led to "irregularity of habits" — drunkenness, violence and the squandering of money.[50] In the last resort, Mayhew's sympathy for the poor was so great that it overrode his own middle class prejudices. In a number of places he observed that morality was very different when viewed from the perspective of middle class comfort as against the realities of life amongst the poor:

> It is easy enough to be moral after a good dinner beside a snug sea-coal fire, and with our hearts well warmed with fine old port. It is easy enough for those that can enjoy these things daily to pay their poor-rates, rent their pew, and "love their neighbours as themselves"; but place the self-same highly respectable people on a raft without sup or bite on the high sea, *and they would toss up who should eat their fellows* . . . Morality on £5000 a year in Belgrave-square, is a very different thing to morality on slop-wages in Bethnal-green.[51]

In his speech to the tailors at a special public meeting on the 28th October, 1850, explaining his reasons for withdrawing from *The Morning Chronicle,* he passionately denounced the inequities of contemporary capitalist society, and perhaps came nearest to a socialist ethic and philosophy. He subsequently went on to write *London Labour and the London Poor,* some of which included part of his *Morning Chronicle* material. After this work, he fell into oblivion and obscurity. The poor seemed to bring out the very best of Mayhew; without them, his work sunk back into the rather pedestrian satirical plays and novels written for a middle class reading public (*The Morning Chronicle* survey was read by a wide range of social classes[52]).

The very best of Mayhew was the material he collected on the lives of the poor, "from the lips of the people themselves". The range and depth of these autobiographies is so brilliant, that no amount of commentary can even come near to their quality and importance. Mayhew opened up a new history of the English people in this part of his work, as his informants had come from all parts of the

country and spanned the complete age range. The reader has to read the survey itself to appreciate this part of his work. Dances and music at the harvest celebrations, vagabond life in the countryside and its pleasures and hardships, the problems of a country linen-draper, the harshness of convict life in Australia — the floggings and killings — the brutal conditions on board ship for emigrants (but not convicts — these were protected by their military escort), the meekness and deference of some of the poor, suffering the worst of all poverties, the colour prejudice experienced by an Indian street entertainer — this and a host of other subjects are covered in what we would now consider the beginnings of oral history. Mayhew died in July 1887, forgotten and unknown; he is now recognized as one of the great pioneers of sociological study, but above all, he was a man of deep sympathy and compassion for the suffering of the poor.

Peter Razzell

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