

Artisans and Dossers: The 1886 West End Riots and the East End Casual Poor

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The Trafalgar Square Riots

Clubs and shops in the West End of London were attacked on 8 February, 1886, by unemployed workers who had earlier gathered at a protest meeting in Trafalgar Square. Frederick Engels characterised those involved in the attacks as 'the poor devils of the East End who vegetate in the border between working class and lumpenproletariat' mixed with some 'roughs and "Arrys" '. The *Daily News* said the rioters were 'loafers from the docks, and habitual criminals from the East-End'. Most of those involved, noted the *Daily Telegraph*, 'were not genuine industrious working men, but members of the "rough" class, largely recruited from the East-end'.¹ The looming threat to the respectable and wealthy in the West from the 'other' in the East of the city had never been more clearly demonstrated. Near panic briefly overtook areas of London, and scapegoats were soon found for allowing the attacks to occur.² But as well as feeding contemporary paranoia, the violence of that day has become a central piece of evidence in the historical portrayal of the character of the very poor in the Victorian and Edwardian metropolis, and particularly of those who lived in the slums of the East End. This portrayal has emphasised the 'otherness' of this group, not only in comparison to wealthier residents in other parts of the city, but also clearly to images of a respectable, rational, working class of the period.

Adopting the theme of the newspaper reports, Gareth Stedman Jones has described how after the riot, the crowd 'returned via Oxford Street to the East End'. They were the 'traditional casual poor' he argues, and demonstrated well the apolitical and "pre-industrial" nature of this group. Of the crowd he notes

their hunger and desperation resulted not in the disciplined preparation for socialist revolution but in ... frenzied rioting ... In spirit the crowd was closer to the *Lazarri* of eighteenth-century Naples and Palermo.³

The Trafalgar Square meeting was initiated by the bogus working-class organisation, the *London United Workmen's Committee*, which was closely associated with the protectionist *Fair Trade League*.⁴ Its literature called upon the unemployed to gather at the meeting to agitate against their plight, but more specifically to 'Protest, denounce, and demonstrate against a false commercial system [free trade]', which 'allows the foreigner to rob you'.⁵ The socialist *Social Democratic Federation*, demonstrating its opposition to bodies such as the L.U.W.C., and undoubtedly wishing to retain its position at the head of working-class unemployed protest, resolved to disrupt the meeting, or at least to 'attend and place their views before men who were in danger of being misled'.⁶ The two groups met at Trafalgar Square, with a crowd of at least 20,000, most of whom had not come specifically with either party. After

speeches and some scuffling between the opposing sides, the socialist leader John Burns led a few thousand of the crowd towards Hyde Park to hold a separate meeting. On the way, and after provocation from members, parts of the crowd attacked a number of clubs in Pall Mall and St James' Street. Shop windows were smashed, and the contents looted all along the route.

The Times said the initial meeting at Trafalgar Square was made up chiefly of unemployed building and dock workers, some artisans, and 'a very great many of the idle class'.⁷ The *Illustrated London News* and *Reynolds' Weekly* carried similar descriptions of the crowd.⁸ Police Superintendent Dunlap noted the 'very large number of rough-looking men'.⁹ The emphasis in all the descriptions of the crowd upon the 'roughness' of those present suggests, given the accepted language of such reports, that they were generally poorer workers, and supports *The Times'* more specific characterisation of the crowd, although there is little evidence to allow one to be more detailed than that concerning the general character of the crowd.

Stedman Jones uses this same evidence to define those present as 'the traditional casual poor' who gathered to hear 'Conservative-inspired demands for protection as a solution to unemployment, [and then] could riot the very same afternoon under the banner of socialist revolution'.¹⁰ According to his argument, this demonstrated clearly a weakness for Conservative populism, but also the essentially directionless nature of this group's political responses. 'Unlike the artisans, the unskilled and casual poor were ignorant, inarticulate, and unorganized', he notes, and they showed at times their support for both popular imperialism as well as a reactionary opposition to the high level of Jewish immigration to London in this period. But generally, he argues, they simply exhibited political underdevelopment, volatility and a propensity to riot caused by the 'ever-pressing demands of the stomach, the chronic uncertainty of employment, the ceaselessly shifting nature of the casual-labour market, [and] the pitiful struggle of worker against worker at the dock gate'.¹¹

Other historians have also commented on the apparently apolitical nature of the casual poor. Eric Hobsbawm, for example, described the 'potentially riotous' nature of the 'unorganised poor', while Paul Thompson emphasises in his work on London politics that in the East End and similar areas, 'chronic poverty' bred 'political apathy'.¹² Henry Pelling has also argued that 'it was the more prosperous workers who were the more politically militant and radical, while the lower ranks displayed either apathy or conservatism'.¹³

Such a portrayal, and the generally accepted dichotomy between the politics of the skilled and unskilled, provide a largely unchallenged image of the politics of the London casual poor. This has most recently been restated by Duncan Tanner. In this period, he states,

There were two Londons. The political/electoral problems which the Liberal party faced were most acute in East End seats, and ... the sink holes of poverty ... Voters worked in an enormous variety of ill-paid, casual or sporadic occupations. Tory success was built... on cultural affinities with working-class social activities, on attendance to ethnic tensions, and, allied to this, on support for the protection of British values, British jobs and British international prestige. The attraction of this appeal was far less apparent in the socially mixed and more affluent artisan and lower middle-class settlements in North and South-West London.

In such impoverished 'sink-holes', Tanner suggests, the 'combination of casual, unskilled, and dangerous employment, and squalid social conditions, helped create a conservative and pessimistic culture, based on short-term interest, drinking, gambling, violence, fatalism, the pawnbroker, and an acerbic hedonism'.¹⁴ Reflecting on such views, Jennifer Davis has noted in relation to London that it is remarkable the extent to which modern historians 'portray that [casual poor] group similarly to nineteenth-century observers – as violent, volatile... and, indeed, culturally alien to wider English society'.¹⁵

Although the riots arising from the Trafalgar Square meeting do seem simply to provide evidence for such a portrayal, it is possible to see in the events of 8 February 1886 a great deal more than just backing for such easy characterisations of the nature and responses of a 'casual poor' crowd. Aspects of the events can suggest other ideas about the attitudes of, and influences upon, the poor, and can help provide pointers towards a much more variegated view of the politics of the London working class.

Some of perhaps the most likely audience amongst the unskilled poor rejected the idea of the 8 February protest entirely. A.S. Krausse spoke to unemployed dockers in Limehouse on the day of the meeting and asked if they had considered attending:

'No, Sir. We are men out of work; many of us with family to keep somehow. None of us go to those things... Times are bad enough, but those meetings don't help to make them better. You be sure, sir, that no working man who wants work ever goes to meetings like that'.¹⁶

Such responses could be thought indeed to provide evidence of a fatalism or apathy regarding matters political. Yet the cynicism of the Limehouse dockers was not necessarily as empty or apolitical as might first appear. The *Daily News* commented that the 'prevailing impression' amongst those who *did* attend the meeting was similarly that 'not much was likely to come of meetings such as this'.¹⁷ Yet the evidence shows that this same crowd also reacted in quite definite terms to the politics displayed at the meeting.

Protectionist measures for English industries were the key demands of the L.U.W.C. Yet it was reported that in the speeches at the meeting,

little was said on the question of Protection, as there was evidently a very great mixture of opinion on the matter, and any allusion to that or the subject of emigration met with an unmistakably impatient hearing.¹⁸

It was not simply that part of the crowd brought by the S.D.F. which derided the protectionists. Across the Square, in smaller groups in various 'out-of-the-way corners', noted the *Daily Telegraph*, other 'fair traders' who attempted to speak also faced 'half-mocking' audiences.¹⁹ When Conservative speakers attempted to refer to 'fair-trade views' they were simply and clearly 'refused a hearing' by the crowd. When a Mr Cook

declared that the Conservatives had been entirely in favour of giving relief work to the unemployed ... [he was] interrupted with queries as to the reason they had not done so when in power; and his declarations that the present distress was caused by over production, hostile tariffs, and want of confidence also met with rejoinders.²⁰

The crowd did not generally support the arguments of the protectionists. If those in attendance were in large measure the East End casual poor, as was suggested, then

this provides little support for one of the central assumptions about this group's politics, namely that they were easy prey for such populist politicking.

Yet the claims made by Stedman Jones as to the undeveloped, 'pre-industrial', nature of the political responses of the poor may seem stronger if we look just at that section of the crowd which participated in the violence. The leaders of the L.U.W.C. were based in the East End and clearly a number of their supporters came from there to the meeting.²¹ The major direct evidence used to link the rioters, and the crowd generally, to the East End has been the fact that a number of the rioters marched back in that direction along Holborn and Cheapside. It is the actions of this returning group, more than any other, upon which much of the analysis of the events of the day has been built. Stedman Jones makes a good deal of the fact that, 'Having completed its work, this crowd made its way back to the East End, singing "Rule Britannia" – an eloquent testimony to its confused and limited level of political consciousness'.²²

Is it possible to be more precise as to who formed this crowd – with its 'classically' confused and violent actions – and, indeed as to the social make-up of the rioters generally? S.D.F. supporters are the least likely suspects, although the crowd which contained the rioters had followed Burns out of the Square. One of those arrested was overheard by a constable in a pub after the riot to say that 'About 5,000 of us followed a man from Mayfair, who was carrying a red flag... I did not come out to steal, but when I saw them helping themselves I thought I would have my share', suggesting little involvement with the socialists.²³ The S.D.F. leader, Henry Hyndman, said that in moving from the Square, 'we called upon the people to follow. Many of the other side came too, and a wholly unorganised mob went rushing down Pall Mall'.²⁴ The *Daily News* believed generally that the rioters were the 'roughs' 'who had originally followed the procession of the Fair Traders'.²⁵ On another of those arrested was found 'a [presumably L.U.W.C.] ticket for the procession'. The prisoner confirmed to the magistrate that he was not a 'Social Democrat'.²⁶ Hyndman pointed out, again in seeking to distance the S.D.F. from the riots, that 'Not one of the persons who were afterwards charged at the police-courts was a Socialist'.²⁷

One suggestion as to the social character of the riotous crowd was made by Howard Goldsmid who noted that 'Many – nay most – of the men who took part in the riots of that day came from the low lodging houses'.²⁸ Some of the arrest records support this: a number of men had identifiable common lodging-house addresses or were said to be at present of 'no fixed home'. The *Daily Telegraph* believed that the 'mischief-makers' in the riot were 'that large class of "odd-job men", or nondescript characters, to be seen loitering in the streets'.²⁹ It is possible, as most commentators believed, that it was the 'roughest' section of the crowd which rioted, and they may have been attracted to the meeting by the L.U.W.C. call.³⁰ If so, this would support much of the thrust of Stedman Jones' arguments.

Yet this is complicated by the fact that if we look more closely at the major piece of evidence for this – the riotous and confused 'East End roughs' returning home – we find that the leader of this group was in fact an unemployed artisan. James Mahoney, a 21 year old compositor, incidentally from Marylebone not the East End, was said in court to be 'undoubtedly the ringleader' of this 'mob of some 300 or 400' who returned to the East End through the City, and who 'undoubtedly would have committed much greater destruction but for the precautions taken by the police'.³¹ Police Constable Bush described how he was following the crowd in Newgate Street, and that he

heard the prisoner [Mahoney] purposely shout as he was passing 33, Newgate-street, a restaurant, and I then heard a smash of glass... Every time the crowd slackened he turned round and urged them to come on. He called out "Come on: Rule Britannia", and the cry was taken up by the crowd.³²

Just the fact that one group of the casual poor may have been led in their 'political confusion' by an artisan (perhaps an L.U.W.C. supporter) does not alter the reality of their participation, or the general argument regarding their 'volatility'. But the situation was indeed more complex than that. In fact of all those arrested in the 8 February riots, one third were tradesmen of some type, including amongst them a butcher, tailor, printer, plasterer, compositor, shoemaker and wire-worker. This suggests a much more integral role for the artisans. None of these were Socialists, if we accept Hyndman's testimony. Their presence amongst the rioters raises questions that have hitherto remained unexamined.

The violence which erupted on that day has many similarities to other, earlier, 'mob' incidents in London. In Chartist actions in 1848, and in the bread and Sunday Trading demonstrations of 1855, as well as other similar occurrences, the 'riots' that took place clearly involved a socially mixed cross-section, including both 'respectable' and 'rough' working-class, and, often, assisted greatly by a large number of shop-boys and other youths simply out for a 'lark'.³³ In each event, isolated incidents initiated by a few acted as the catalyst, for the perhaps uncharacteristic violence of others. Evidence from the 1886 riots also suggests a similar pattern of events. Boys and youths were clearly to blame for some of the window breaking, and the rioters were defined by some observers as 'mixed up, rough and respectably-dressed people'.³⁴ Victor Bailey has suggested that on 8 February 'a street riot... developed out of police incompetence'.³⁵ Police failure to clear quickly from the West End an initially easily controlled crowd, in addition to the few incidents of stones hurled at abusive club members, in fact allowed the internal dynamics of an encouraged 'mob' to take over, with much more serious consequences. Yet it is difficult to suggest from the evidence, that in this or other actions the casual poor in the crowd exhibited any greater propensity to violence than other sections of the working class. Vague enough as the evidence is for the 8 February incidents, it was, and continues to be, distorted by the political need to create an 'other' from the casual poor, against which to define the respectable working class. One of the most explicit examples of this distortion can be seen in the *Morning Post's* report of the meeting. As speeches by the Socialist leaders, said the paper, were

cheered to the echo by the listeners, it will be apparent that the proportion of genuine working men amongst them was very small. They included loafers and idlers of the most unprepossessing cast of countenance.³⁶

Similarly, the *Illustrated London News* described how

fanatical orators, belonging to the Socialist Democratic faction... stirred up the feelings of some part of this vague assembly... A rabble of several thousand men and youths, bearing little resemblance to any of the London working classes... mere idlers and reckless street vagabonds... these were, no doubt, the actual rioters at the close of the meeting.³⁷

It appeared that by their very actions the rioters defined their 'class', which of course made it easy to ignore the role of others, such as the artisans who were closely involved in the events. It is quite possible that the artisans arrested on 8 February were also in parts of their trades subject to regular bouts of unemployment. During slack times such workers often swelled the ranks of those seeking casual work in unskilled jobs.

Mahoney's artisan trade of compositing, for example, had a large 'seasonal' fringe, accounting for perhaps up to 20 per cent of the workforce and who were unemployed for large parts of the year.³⁸ Yet, economically, socially and politically, what was the relationship of such artisans to the 'casual poor'? When discussing the politics and other attitudes of this 'group', the implications of these questions have barely been touched upon.

Stedman Jones clearly demonstrates that underemployed artisans formed part of the economic 'problem' of casual labour in London. Yet in turning his focus to the politics of the working class, he delineates a set of shared apolitical attitudes amongst a 'casual poor' which he then carefully defines as 'street traders, porters, riverside workers, casual labourers, vagrants, beggars, and petty criminals'.³⁹ However, the possible political importance of an inter-relationship between the skilled and the unskilled at a very localised and personal level has perhaps been neglected. Mahoney's role in orchestrating the actions of his historically prominent group is one example of this, although little can be said about the role of an individual in one case. But the issue is broader, and to the extent to which the actions of artisans helped to shape our historical judgement of the London 'casual poor' and their politics is an important point. The riotous actions on 8 February, like other similar incidents, certainly involved a physical, and perhaps political, combination of the skilled and the very poorest of the unskilled. An understanding of the implications and issues involved in this possibility requires a knowledge of the economic and political interaction that existed between the artisans and labourers in poorer areas of London such as the East End, and of the 'levels' within the casual labour market. Economic and social structures within each of these separate sections influenced politics in quite distinct ways.

Artisans and the Casual Poor in East London

The unskilled casual labour market in the classic location of nineteenth-century London poverty, the East End, is much easier to delineate and study than one would expect. Essentially this is because, as Charles Booth clearly stated, in 'East London the largest field for casual labour is at the Docks; indeed there is no other important field'.⁴⁰ Stedman Jones disagrees with this. In seeking to convey the image of an East End 'casual labour market of almost unparalleled dimensions', he argues that one should not focus too much upon the docks, on the basis that 'Beatrice Potter estimated that even in Tower Hamlets there were at least 10,000 casual labourers who did not depend on dock and waterside employment'.⁴¹ But this is a misreading of what Potter said and leads to a false impression of the extent of casual labour in this part of London. What Potter actually stated was that

we believe, from our general inquiry, that there are 10,000 casual labourers, exclusive of waterside labourers, resident in the Tower Hamlets, employed principally at the docks.⁴²

She was in fact arguing that as well as those employed on the wharves in the port – that is, the 'waterside labourers' – the better part of 10,000 other casual labourers

were employed in dock jobs.⁴³ What this misquotation indicates is the type of misunderstanding of London port employment which has led generally to a perception of far greater levels of distress than was the reality. This will be explained in more detail below.

In general, contrary to the contemporary view and that of historians that there were 'teeming masses' of the starving unskilled casual poor in East London who could swell demonstrations such as on 8 February, there were relatively few. Of the 180–190,000 adult males employed in the East End, more than half were in occupations classified as skilled, professional, or trading/merchant (excluding street traders).⁴⁴ Only around 55,000 were classified as being in completely unskilled positions. Table 1 shows the numbers in each 'labouring' sector in the 1891 census.⁴⁵

Table 1: Labouring employment in East London, 1891

dock and wharf labourers	14,000
building labourers	3,500
carmen and carriers	8,000
porters	6,000
gasworkers, stokers etc	3,500
coal porters, coal heavers etc	1,500
factory labourers	1,500
road labourers, navvies	1,000
chimney sweeps, scavengers etc	500
warehousemen	2,500
manual miscellaneous occupations	3,000
'general labourers'	9,000

Source: 1891 census

Booth's figures suggest that of these men normally engaged in manual occupations, around one third were not in receipt of a completely regular wage.⁴⁶ Even of this third, a significant number suffered relatively little underemployment. Booth noted of the workers in the area, that the 'great body of the labouring class ... have a regular steady income, such as it is'.⁴⁷ Of the 8,000 carmen [cart transport drivers] and common carriers, for example, Booth noted that the 'great bulk' of employment consisted of the handling of the vans and carts of a 'multitude' of small businesses, with constant employment and a 'living wage'.⁴⁸ Across the trade only a small proportion was casually employed, perhaps 5–10 per cent.⁴⁹

In the building trade – which Stedman Jones suggests as 'a major alternative focus of casual employment' – most labourers were quite regularly employed, with numbers employed fluctuating by perhaps 5–8 per cent from the average in good and bad times of the year.⁵⁰ In the East End, building work was far less affected by the important 'seasonal' factor of the constant demand by wealthier customers in other parts of London for work to be done while they were away during summer.⁵¹ Similarly, the 1,500 or so factory workers were not subject to much casualness. Will Thorne noted that the 'Laborers in ironworks, soap, chemical etc', which were covered by his union, 'have fairly constant work'.⁵² Overall, applying such an analysis to evidence regarding

the whole list of unskilled employment areas – excluding port and ‘general’ labouring work – suggests that ‘regularly’ employed labourers accounted for around 80 per cent of employment in these areas.⁵³

In addition to this, there were also many more ‘professional’ workers employed in the port than usually allowed for. On the docks themselves prior to the Great Strike of 1889 there was a small number of permanently employed workers at each dock location – in 1887 there were just under 1,000 ‘permanents’ employed across the three northside dock groups, London and St Katherine’s, West and East India and Millwall. Then there were the ‘preference’ men or ‘Royals’, who were called first when there was casual work available, and who received relatively regular work. There were probably 1,500 at these docks in this category. Then there were the true ‘casuals’, who had to compete for the rest of the jobs when, and if, they came. The number of these casual jobs varied widely between perhaps 500 and 5,000, and Potter’s estimates suggest that perhaps 7,000 or more casual labourers competed at times for these, so clearly many were often unable to obtain work.

But employment on the wharves and associated warehouses was much more regular. While the fluctuations in dock employment are noted above, Booth’s figures show that in 1891–92 on the northside wharves, the maximum number of labourers employed was 4,800, the minimum 3,300, the average 4,000; a variation far less than that of the docks, and so allowing much greater certainty for the wharf workers. Booth concluded that

Work at the wharves is less subject to fluctuation than at the docks, and the variations from day to day, or week to week, are not great... The northside wharves and warehouses offer pretty fair employment for 4,500 men, and probably 5,000 seek a living at them.⁵⁴

There has been an historical concentration upon the more obvious situation on the docks, but the East End wharves employed in total more men, on average, than the docks, and far more regularly, and far fewer competed for the work there. Stedman Jones has suggested that the rise of the separate wharf companies on the river – with 115 in existence by 1900 – adversely affected the lives of riverside workers because casual labour was relatively immobile and so an individual surplus of labour needed to be encouraged at each employment site to cope with times of extra demand.⁵⁵ Yet the small size of employing entities, combined with the particular type of work the wharves handled, meant that a more personal relationship developed with those who sought work there, leading to quasi-permanence, or at least ‘preference’ for a large number, even if they were officially defined as ‘casual’. Booth noted that at the wharves there was ‘less competition, or less chance of competition, between outsiders and those who, being always on the spot, are personally known to the employers and their foremen’.⁵⁶ Union officials explained the system:

There are no hours of call at a wharf. At the end of a job the men are told when to come next... This system no doubt tends to keep wharf work in the hands of the same men... Work at the wharves is far more regular than at the Docks, because as only certain lines come to particular wharves, their arrival can be approximately timed and the work arranged for beforehand.⁵⁷

There are two significant points to be made from this evidence. First, the above figures show that there was a large number of port workers in East London who did not have

to struggle at the dock gates for work every day. Combining the wharf workers with the 'permanents' and 'preferables' at the docks, at least half of the labouring jobs in the port went to men quite regularly employed, that is, around 5,000 out of the 8–10,000 on average in work. So, as a report on poverty amongst dock labourers (defined broadly) stated in 1908, 'dock labour is by no means a great mass of casual and unorganised labour such as it has often been represented to be'.⁵⁸ But in the port, in addition to those who were regularly employed, there were perhaps up to 10,000 others who consistently competed for the extra casual jobs, including both a smaller number of other 'professional' dock and wharf labourers, and a large number of 'general labourers'. In addition to these, there were the seasonally unemployed artisans and others who at various times swelled these numbers. It was amongst these groups that the classic 'crush at the dock gate' took place, and, as both Booth and Potter suggested, it was they who formed the 'core' of East End casual labour.

This picture of the unskilled labour market in the East End is generally much less desperate and chaotic than normally portrayed. But having defined a smaller group of the unskilled 'casual poor', and positioned it very much upon the docks, how can this help in looking more closely at our perceptions of the politics of the poorest of the working class, and in particular the importance of their social circumstances in the development of attitudes? Rather than their 'otherness', it is the relationship of this group with other sections of the working class that is of significance here.

Levels within the ranks of casual dock labouring can in fact perhaps be defined most clearly by their relationship to underemployed artisans, as suggested earlier. First, there is the often cited statement of the secretary of the Dockers' Union, Ben Tillett, who told a parliamentary committee in 1888 of the large numbers of those seeking casual work at the docks in London who were not 'dock labourers by trade'. At 'least 25 per cent of them had been at some trade', having been, Tillett argued, often forced into dock work through undercutting by immigrant workers in such fields as tailoring.⁵⁹ But those 'artisans' seeking work at the dock gates can be divided into two groups. First, there were those who sought work simply because their own trade was slow. This was one 'level' of the casual labour market. Tillett himself noted that in

the winter when a large number of men in the building trade are turned off, and men in the tailoring trade, and the bootmaking, and the costermongering; we get them from all these various sources.⁶⁰

Edward Steward, a dock labourer for 16 years, also argued, when the 'season' returned for these various trades, they returned to them:

the painters, when the sun is out we lose them; and the tailors, when they improve in their styles and fashions, we lose them; so that we are left by ourselves as dock labourers at certain times.⁶¹

Certainly these underemployed artisans had little on-going contact with those who remained attached to casual dock work throughout the year. This can be shown particularly by the results of a survey of 189 casually employed East End riverside workers applying to Mansion House for relief in 1893. All these men were, or had been, members of a trade union (they were part of a total of 372 applicants). The survey showed that only 10 had at any point previously been members of unions representing artisans. This was reinforced by a similar result in a survey in 1909,

amongst 107 dock-worker applicants to the Poplar distress committee – again, almost none of the applicants had previously been in a skilled trade, although many had come from other labouring areas.⁶²

Yet it was also continually claimed that the poorest end of the dock workforce included very many who permanently ‘drifted’ into the work from other trades. Arnold White wrote of the many amongst the labourers who ‘gravitate to the riverside’ who were

artisans who have dropped their subscriptions to their unions and societies through want, who have sold their tools for bread, and who have thus been driven down the ladder of life from the exercise of skill to the exertion of brute force.⁶³

The key reason why this did not show in these surveys is that these relief committees, as in nearly all such cases, had specifically excluded all men who lived in common lodging houses from their schemes, usually arguing that these ‘irresponsible characters’ did not deserve this help. As Alexander Paterson, who temporarily became such a character, noted, ‘To the Distress Committee, and similar agencies for the unemployed, we of the lodging-house are outcasts. No man who gives this as his address will be allowed to enter his name upon the register of unemployed persons’.⁶⁴ It was these ‘dossers’ amongst the casual dock labourers who were most likely to include men who had lost positions in their own trades. It was also mainly workers from this group who only gained occasional work at the docks. They were the unattached casuals – those most likely to have called themselves ‘general labourers’ – and were most typically, but of course not exclusively, single men who lived in the cheapest common lodging houses.

There were at least four groups of workers at the docks identified with the East End casual labour force: underemployed artisans and others who came to dock work at times of slack employment; ‘professional’ dockers who were either ‘preferables’ or in the higher levels of the casual workforce; and the lowest level typified by the ‘dossers’ who themselves had at least two components – the very poorest of the casual labourers and those men who had ‘declined’ from their own trades into unskilled work and the lodging house. Politically, these divisions are important.

Amongst those such as the artisans who had been forced out of their trades by lack of work, it seems probable, as will be suggested below, that the protectionism offered by the London United Workmen’s Committee and others was an appealing policy. How this issue may also have been taken up by some of the very poorest of the casual unskilled will also be further considered below. The ‘professional’, even if sometimes nominally casual, labourer, on the other hand, had little contact with such views, and there is little direct evidence of protectionist views being put forward by these workers. Certainly it can be argued that it is likely that much of the anti-protectionist comment at the Trafalgar Square meeting came from the ‘professional’ labourers who undoubtedly formed a large part of the crowd – as in the terribly hard winter of 1886 even the best-placed ‘preferable’ was out of work. Making distinctions between the views of labourers of different ‘levels’ of work makes more sense in view of the fact that in terms of political influences, as well as in their social, and economic, circumstances, the ‘professional’ docker was quite distinct from some of his fellow workers who ‘dossed’ in the lodging houses.

Lodging Houses and Politics

Perhaps as many as half of the completely casual/irregular labourers in the East End lived at least part of the time in common lodging houses or similar accommodation. There were around 8,500 beds for males in common lodging houses registered in the East End throughout this period, with an occupancy rate of 80 per cent.⁶⁵ But in addition to these numbers there was a 'floating' population who spent some of their time in the lodging houses, part in casual wards or other shelters and the rest on the streets.⁶⁶ There was a thin line between those who happened to spend the night in a lodging house and those who did not:

When you enter the 'kitchen' of a 'doss-house', it would be a mistake to suppose that all the people you meet there are going to spend the night under its roof. Many of them are 'reg'lar'uns', who, in consideration of their constant patronage are permitted to spend the evening, or a portion of it, before the blazing coke fire... glancing towards the door at each fresh arrival to see if a 'pal' has come in from whom it may be possible to borrow the halfpence necessary to complete their doss-money. At last, their final hope being gone, they shuffle out into the streets and prepare to spend the night with only the sky for a canopy.⁶⁷

Goldsmid noted that many in this situation had 'hung about the docks or the markets the whole day, and very possibly have not even earned a penny'.⁶⁸ In 1886 Henry Davids, Secretary of the Mariner's Friend Society, described how in the poorest areas of St George's-in-the-East, there were 'dock labourers... living mostly in lodging houses... and sleeping indoors when they can find 4d., at other times in the street'.⁶⁹ Similarly in 1905 Police Superintendent Mulvany of the Whitechapel Division described the occupants of lodging houses in his area as 'labourers, dock labourers, itinerant traders of all sorts, men selling toys about the streets, and newspaper lads'.⁷⁰ Many such labourers suffered the most intermittent employment. Booth noted that the 'common doss houses contain a casual class very few of whom are regular labourers' whilst Krause described how very few of the labourers in the lodging house in Limehouse he visited in 1886 had worked that day.⁷¹ Missionaries visiting the area reported that not more than five per cent of lodging house residents were regularly employed.⁷²

It was also an accepted fact that a significant number of the residents of the lodging houses and similar accommodation, even though now reduced to casual labour, had previously been in 'good' positions. Of the inmates of the Whitechapel casual ward in 1904 who were 'recruited' mainly from the common lodging houses, the residents nearly all described themselves at that time as casual dock and general labourers.⁷³ Yet 40 per cent had worked in at least one relatively skilled occupation.⁷⁴ A similar percentage was found in the St George's ward, and was undoubtedly repeated in the common lodging houses, and indeed on the streets. Goldsmid also noted that large numbers of residents of low lodging houses were 'respectable artisans whom the waves of trade depression have overtaken and submerged; clerks... small shopkeepers... even professional men' (although the majority of residents had still come from labouring backgrounds).⁷⁵ Montagu Williams recorded that many were 'broken-down tradesmen, decayed gentlemen'.⁷⁶ Paterson summed up the situation neatly for the lodging house at which he stayed:

We are almost entirely the riverside crowd, the shuffling figures that throng the wharves each early morning. By one route or another we have come to be casual

labourers; with some it is a destiny inherited (with little else) from riverside fathers, but many have been cast out on the river-bank by an economic tide from the land. We do not belong to the upper class of riverside labourer, who is regularly attached to some factory and wharf.⁷⁷

There are two ways in which the social composition of the lodging houses is important to this discussion of politics. First, only as a minor issue, it is possible that in events such as the 8 February riots, men regarded as the poorest 'labourers' could have been of backgrounds such as those described above. One of the 'lodging-house labourers' arrested on the day, at least, admitted to the court that he had previously been a clerk who had 'declined' to the lodging house life.⁷⁸ What does it mean for our perception of the 'casual poor' and our understanding of the politics of the 'residuum', if an even larger number of those involved in the riots were underemployed or had 'declined' from other positions? Secondly, not only is it possible that former artisans could influence our perceptions of the politics of the 'unskilled, casual poor' directly through their actions, but also it is very likely that by their presence in the common lodging houses they strongly influenced the views of their fellow residents. As Kellow Chesney remarked regarding mid-century London lodging houses, there 'was a good deal of club spirit about some of the smaller lodging-house kitchens, a sense of membership', and like any club, this could lead to a sharing of views.⁷⁹ As R.A. Valpy wrote, in the lodging houses men were seen 'recounting anecdotes and experiences... and discussion – political and theological'.⁸⁰ The London City Mission had missionaries throughout this period specifically assigned to common lodging houses. A missionary complained in 1895 that at his services every Sunday in the houses, not only might the 'quality or quantity' of the hymn singing be criticised, but also that after his address he could 'be confronted with quotations from men of various views (Paine, Tyndall, Huxley, McCheyne, and Farrar)'.⁸¹ Other missionaries reported similar experiences, also in discussions amongst the men themselves. One found a 'broken-down university man' denouncing the Bible and asserting that man 'is only one of the higher order of brute', while giving a lecture on physiology to about fifty men 'as low and brutal as himself'.⁸² Booth commented that mission services had had to be curtailed in some East End lodging houses because 'theological wrangling of too animated a character followed the introduction of some debateable doctrine... And this among the people who are often referred to as having never heard of Christ!'⁸³

Battles over theology tell us little about the politics of these people but they do indicate that the lodging houses were not themselves the intellectually dead or hopeless places that could be assumed from their association with the most casual and most deprived of the London poor. But what was the process or pattern of discussions in these places, and how does it affect our impressions of the politics of the working-class poor? One striking thing shown by an examination of attitudes espoused by casual labourers in lodging houses was how much the issue of protection was dominant – and that this was being brought in by those who had been displaced from other trades. Goldsmid in his journeys in 1886 found in the lodging houses regular discussion of

... the fair-trade heresy, and I am bound to say that I never, during all my experience of the doss-ouses, heard a single man who had a good word to say for our system of free imports... I could not fail to notice that every man who

had formerly occupied a good position ascribed the stagnation in trade which had ruined him to Free Trade.⁸⁴

This issue of protection continued to be a major topic of discussion in doss-houses. In 1912, Thomas Holmes found that the residents 'speak very much like other people, and speak on subjects upon which other people speak... Here are a couple of wordy excitable fellows who are arguing the pros and cons of Free Trade and Tariff Reform'.⁸⁵ L. Cope Cornford, in 1905, discussing with an East End homeless and lodging house crowd whether the distress at that time was largely due to the militancy, independence, or other 'faults' of the workman, received 'Dead silence' as his response.

A pause. Then an old man [who had been 'a skilled mechanic'] rose up and said:- "In my opinion, it is entirely want of protection what has done it." Murmurs of assent...⁸⁶

Despite the arguments that artisans supported the free trade system, while the unintelligent labourer could fall under the 'spell' of the protectionists, it seems very clear that protectionist views were being promulgated by those who had seen better days.⁸⁷ Lionel North found on the Embankment a homeless man from the carpet trade who told him 'I sometimes think there'll be nothing more to do for me in this country, unless we get protection – or something'. North commented that it 'was quite astonishing how many men I met that night who shared his views', noting particularly the statements of an old farrier.⁸⁸ An optician in the Whitechapel casual ward blamed 'French and Austrian competition'.⁸⁹ Direct statements of support for protection by the unskilled were not mentioned, which is not surprising given that the artisans and others were more articulate, but this is also interesting in terms of what evidence historians have for this attitude amongst the unskilled poor. This articulacy in itself is significant because it gave these 'protectionist' men influence.

The 'orators' in the common lodging houses had great sway amongst their listeners. Paterson wrote in 1909 that the ordinary resident of the lodging house was accustomed to 'seize' on any expression of opinion which seemed informed on matters of public interest, and 'having chosen a fitting shibboleth, to close the discussion by repeating the aphorism'.⁹⁰ The man who had travelled before finding himself in the lodging house, said G. Holden Pike,

exercises an influence which they cannot hope to command who have not enjoyed similar privileges... [he] is proud to have his opinion quoted in the uproarious disputes around the kitchen fire, as coming from the final court of appeal.⁹¹

Clearly the most intelligent or best orators won the day and arguments. Goldsmid found 'remarkable... the strained attention with which such oracles are listened to by their companions'.⁹² In another case, the speaker 'gave the table another thump, while his companions cheered him for his cleverness'.⁹³ The men best able to relate their opinions, and have them best formed, developed a following in the lodging houses, where the men seem to have often been keen to hear 'explanations' of their plight. Goldsmid wrote of the many who 'ponder over social inequalities... their real grievances and aggravating them by dreaming of imaginary wrongs'.⁹⁴

The question arises of whether this indicates that the casual poor were 'easy targets' for such ideas. But an important point is that, as noted above, the common lodging

house was indeed like a 'club', which made such opinions much more easily accepted than if they were merely espoused from the street corner. Indeed, the arguments made by John Davis regarding the London working-men's clubs are relevant here. It seems undoubtedly true that politics within the lodging houses could also

draw upon partisanship and 'clubability' without requiring political erudition or sophistication... The strength of associationalism – the ability of social loyalties to generate a shared political partisanship – remained... associational politics still required opinion formers, and it is likely that their expertise and articulacy gave them a greater influence.⁹⁵

The lodging houses were therefore not just somewhere for the homeless to sleep but were also homes and centres of social life. James Greenwood described a Spitalfields lodging house in 1890:

everybody seemed to know and to be on terms of easy familiarity with everyone else... by far the greater number – say sixteen in every twenty – fix on a particular house, and there they remain as regular lodgers summer and winter, sometimes for many years, and by right of user claim one particular bed, with a certain seat in the kitchen, and a place no one else may take at the table.⁹⁶

Edward Barnett, the London City Missionary to the lodging houses, found that at '11 o'clock in the morning you will find some 200 men gathered together' in the kitchen of the house, clearly ensuring social interaction.⁹⁷ Paterson noted the 'tendency to fellowship and forgiveness... a oneness' amongst the residents of the houses, and described the particular social structures that developed, with their 'rules of forms and manners'.⁹⁸ Francis Smiley commented upon the 'practical sympathy' that existed amongst those in a Spitalfields house, while another observer spoke of the 'bonhomie' he saw in a house in St George's.⁹⁹ The development of such 'communities' in lodging houses provided the basis for the trust placed in the 'orators'. As long-term residents, like many of their listeners, they were accepted as speaking from the same position as their audience, with the additional influence that this brought, just as the club lecturer could attract loyalty to his cause.

Conclusion

This examination of lodging houses and the influence of social relationships on the political attitudes of the poor strongly suggests the need to look more closely at the significance of the local, and the very personal, in the development of the views and responses of the London working class. These factors have previously received little attention. In particular, specific local economic and social conditions were vitally important in creating the basis for the attitudes of unskilled workers. The main point that emerges is that any connection between the conditions of poverty in parts of London and the development of political thought was a much more complex and varying process than has hitherto been described.

The consistent support for protectionism exhibited by many of the declined artisans and tradesmen in London lodging houses clearly encouraged their fellow residents to at least adopt these views as 'shibboleths', as Paterson noted. Many others of the unskilled seem to have rejected these views. But this specific personal influence

amongst the poorest may go some way toward explaining a 'mixture of opinion' amongst the unskilled on this issue, as was apparent at the February 1886 meeting in Trafalgar Square. Instead of simply confirming a view of a 'pre-industrial' casual poor this examination of that meeting, and the issues connected with it shows clearly that we need to uncover a great deal more about the dynamics of politics amongst the metropolitan working class, and particularly amongst its poorest members.

NOTES

1. F. Engels and P. and L. Lafargue, *Correspondence*, vol.1 (Moscow 1959), 334; *Daily News*, 10 February, 1886, 5; *Daily Telegraph*, 9 February, 1886, 5.
2. See R. Sindall, *Street Violence in the Nineteenth Century: Media Panic or Real Danger* (Leicester 1990), 71–74, 99–100, 122–125; Parliamentary Paper (P.P.), 1886 XXXIV; *Report of the Committee on the Origin and Character of the Disturbances in the Metropolis on 8th February 1886*, and G.S. Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (1976), 292–294.
3. Jones, *Outcast London*, 292, 345.
4. See *The Critic*, vol.146, 18 June to 9 July, 1898.
5. See *Daily News*, 9 February, 1886, 5, and *Justice*, 13 February, 1886, 3.
6. *Justice*, 13 February, 1886, 3. For the role of the S.D.F. see P. Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour: the Struggle for London 1885–1914* (1967), 114–115.
7. *The Times*, 9 February, 1886, 6.
8. *Illustrated London News*, 13 February, 1886, 173; see Sindall, *Street Violence*, 73.
9. *Committee on ... Disturbances*, q.1374.
10. Jones, *Outcast London*, 343.
11. *Ibid.*, 341, 344.
12. E. Hobsbawm, 'The Aristocracy of Labour Reconsidered', in *idem*; *Worlds of Labour: Further Studies in the History of Labour* (1984), 244; Thompson, *Socialists*, 84 and 239.
13. H. Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (1968), 56.
14. D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour party, 1900–1918*, (Cambridge 1990), 130–131 and 164–165, 171.
15. J. Davis, 'Jennings' Buildings and the Royal Borough: The construction of the underclass in mid-Victorian England' in D. Feldman and G.S. Jones (eds), *Metropolis London: Histories and representations since 1800* (1989), footnote 6, 32.
16. A.S. Krausse, *Starving London: The Story of a Three Weeks' Sojourn Among the Destitute*, (1886), 16–17.
17. *Daily News*, 9 February, 1886, 5.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Daily Telegraph*, 9 February, 1886, 3.
20. *The Times*, 9 February, 1886, 6.
21. See *East London Advertiser*, 5 September, 1885, 6; 19 September, 1885, 7; 9 February, 1886.
22. Jones, *Outcast London*, 345.
23. *Daily News*, 10 February, 1886, 6.
24. H.M. Hyndman, *The Record of an Adventurous Life* (1911), 401.
25. *Daily News*, 10 February, 1886, 5.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *The Times*, 12 April, 1886, 7.
28. H. Goldsmid, *Dottings of a Dosser: Being Revelations of the Inner Life of Low London Lodging Houses* (1886), 136.
29. *Daily Telegraph*, 9 February, 1886, 3.
30. See, for example, *The Times*, 8 April, 1886, 12.
31. *Daily News*, 16 February, 1886, 5.
32. *Morning Post*, 10 February, 1886, 6.

33. See M. Brodie, 'Politics and the Unskilled Poor in Mid-Nineteenth Century London', unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Melbourne, 1993, chapter three.
34. See *Committee on ... Disturbances*, q.2817 and Appendix VIII, 490; *Saturday Review*, 13 February, 1886, 219; *The Times*, 7 April, 1886, 6; *Daily News*, 10 February, 1886, 5; *Illustrated London News*, 13 February, 1886, 174.
35. V. Bailey, 'The Metropolitan Police, the Home Office and the Threat of Outcast London', in V. Bailey (ed), *Policing and Punishment in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1981), 100; Sindall, *Street Violence*, 123.
36. *Morning Post*, 9 February, 1886, 5.
37. *Illustrated London News*, 13 February, 1886, 173.
38. See W. Beveridge, *Unemployment: A Problem of Industry* (1909), 140–141.
39. See Jones, *Outcast London*, 19–155 passim; 342.
40. C. Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, 17 Vols. (1902), Poverty, First Series, vol.1, 42.
41. Jones, *Outcast London*, 100.
42. Booth, *Life and Labour*, First Series, vol.4, 25–26.
43. Docks were the large, specially built, areas for the ocean-going ships whilst the wharves were those structures built straight onto the river, and which usually dealt with the coastal trade.
44. See Jones, *Outcast London*, Table 16, 389, and comparing this to Table 15, and deducting the number of employed males aged 10–20 as shown in the 1901 census.
45. On the distribution of the number of "general labourers", see Arthur Baxter in Booth, *Life and Labour*, First Series, vol.1, 469–470.
46. *Ibid.*, Chapter III, Table XVI.
47. *Ibid.*, 44, 51.
48. The census lists 10,000, but one-fifth were probably boy 'van-guards'.
49. See Booth, *Life and Labour*, Second Series, vol.3, 323–324, 327; Charity Organisation Society, *Report from the Special Committee on Unskilled Labour* (1908), 50–52 and evidence of George Lavington, qq.1484–1488.
50. Jones, *Outcast London*, 125; P.P.1910 XLIX, *Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and the Relief of Distress*, Appendix no.XXI(D), 647.
51. See E. Aves in Booth, *Life and Labour*, Second Series, vol.1, 115–118.
52. British Library of Political and Economic Science, Charles Booth Collection MSS B144, 7. See also the evidence of Alexander Horn, Directing Manager of Clarke, Nickolls & Coombs, confectioners, C.O.S., *Unskilled Labour*, q.1761.
53. For further details see M.Brodie, ' "Politics Stirs Them Very Little": Conservatism and "Apathy" in the East End of London, 1885–1914', D.Phil thesis, University of Oxford, forthcoming, Chapter One.
54. Booth, *Life and Labour*, Second Series, vol.3, 410, 419.
55. Jones, *Outcast London*, 124.
56. Booth, *Life and Labour*, First Series, vol.1, 42.
57. Evidence of Costello and Driscoll, Booth MSS B141, 102.
58. P.P.1908 XCII, *Report on Dock Labour*, 500.
59. P.P. 1888 XXI, *Select Committee on the Sweating System*, qq.12658–12668.
60. *Ibid.*, q.12828.
61. *Ibid.*, q.13213.
62. P.P. 1893–94 LXXXII, *Board of Trade report on Agencies and Methods for Dealing with the Unemployed*, 625–626; P.P.1909 XLIV, R.C. Poor Laws, pp.769–772.
63. A. White, 'The Nomad Poor of London', *Contemporary Review*, vol.XLVII (May 1885), 717–718.
64. See H.V. Toynbee, 'A Winter's Experiment', *Macmillan's Magazine*, vol.LXIX (November 1893), 56 and "A.P" [Alexander Paterson], 'The Common Lodging House – III', *Toynbee Record*, vol.XXI, no.6 (March 1909), 95.
65. See the Report by London County Council Medical Officer on the Census of Homeless on the night of 8th February 1907, London Metropolitan Archives LCC/CL/PH/1/261, 2;

- figures on common lodging houses included in *London Statistics* throughout the period, particularly vol.XV (1904–05), 217; and evidence of Superintendent J.Mulvany, P.P.1906 CIII, *Report of the Departmental Committee on Vagrancy*, qq.9632–9633.
66. See C.B. Marshall, 'The Homeless Poor of London', *Economic Review*, vol.II, no.2, (April 1892), 260, discussing the Charity Organisation Society report on the homeless.
 67. Goldsmid, *Dottings*, 72–74.
 68. Ibid.
 69. *East London Advertiser*, 9 January, 1886, 7.
 70. *Report on ... Vagrancy*, q.9634.
 71. See British Library of Political and Economic Science, Passfield Collection, section from Booth's notebook in Beatrice Webb's MS Diary, vol.11, 56 (typescript 830); Krausse, *Starving*, 14.
 72. *London City Mission Magazine*, vol.58 (2 October, 1893), 227 and vol.76 (May 1911), 83.
 73. See Marshall, 'Homeless Poor', 260.
 74. H. Thorp, 'The Casual Ward System – III', *Toynbee Record*, vol.XVII, no.10, (July–September 1905), 80–81.
 75. Goldsmid, *Dottings*, 10.
 76. M. Williams, *Later Leaves* (1891), 378.
 77. "A.P.", 'Common Lodging House – IV', *Toynbee Record*, vol.XXI, no.8 (May 1909), 130.
 78. *The Times*, 11 February, 1886, 6.
 79. K. Chesney, *Victorian Underworld* (1989), 110.
 80. Booth, *Life and Labour*, First Series, vol.1, 209.
 81. *London City Mission Magazine*, vol.60 (1 February, 1895), 36.
 82. J. Hunt, *Pioneer Work in the Great City: The Autobiography of a London City Missionary*, (1895), 101–102.
 83. Booth, *Life and Labour*, Third Series, vol.2, 17–18.
 84. Goldsmid, *Dottings*, 133.
 85. T. Holmes, *London's Underworld* (1912), 72–73.
 86. L.C. Cornford, *The Canker at the Heart: Being Studies from the Life of the Poor in the Year of Grace 1905*, (1905), 77–78.
 87. See R. McKibbin, 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?', in idem, *Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880–1950* (1991), 31; Jones, *Outcast London*, 343.
 88. L. North, *Human Documents: Lives Re-Written by the Holy Spirit*, [1909], 223, 227–228.
 89. H. Thorp, 'The Casual Ward System – I', *Toynbee Record*, vol.XVII, no.5, (February 1905), 80.
 90. "A.P.", 'The Common Lodging House – II', *Toynbee Record*, vol.XXI, no.5, (February 1909), 81–82.
 91. G.H. Pike, *Pity for the Perishing* (1884), 133.
 92. Goldsmid, *Dottings*, 132.
 93. Hunt, *Pioneer*, 103.
 94. Goldsmid, *Dottings*, 134.
 95. J. Davis, 'Radical clubs and London politics, 1870–1900', in Feldman and Jones, *Metropolis*, 116–117.
 96. J. Greenwood ['One of the Crowd'], 'Sleep of the Homeless', *Daily Telegraph*, 26 December, 1890, 7.
 97. *London City Mission Magazine*, vol.71, (1 June, 1906), 159. See also idem, vol.64, (1 November, 1899), 245–246.
 98. "A.P.", 'Common Lodging House – II', 81.
 99. F. Smiley, *The Evangelization of a Great City: or the Churches' Answer to the Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (Philadelphia 1890), 141; Anonymous, 'Leaves from the Life of a "Poor Londoner"', *Good Words*, (August 1885), 532.