The Imagination of Class

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It may seem odd to focus a chapter in a book like this on a woman—in this case, a very prominent and unusual woman. However, Beatrice Webb is an important figure in this text for a variety of reasons, and her dilemma is one that is emblematic of that facing many male professionals in the nineteenth century with a concern for solving the problem of poverty. She exemplifies, in more than one way, both how the hope of fighting urban poverty fired the imaginations of an idealistic generation and how those hopes were menaced by the threat of enervation. As her writings reveal, she felt both inspired by the mission and menaced by its seeming hopelessness, her own desires and wishes undercut by the intensity of abject experience. Nonetheless, she, more so than others, reinterpreted the central ethical challenge of outreach toward the poor as the duty of those with power toward those without it. Moreover, she contributed mightily both to a richly ruminative diary that details the psychological impact of her developing sense of mission and to the larger, more detached, public scientific projects—in particular, Charles Booth’s large-scale study of poverty in London to which she made a significant contribution—that marked a significant change in the professional stance toward poverty in the City. In her diary she illuminates both how the mission to grapple with poverty threatens the bourgeois subject with engulfment by the abject, and how that threat is distanced and contained through a strategy that employs detachment in the interest of culturalist philanthropy.
A sense of sin, says Beatrice Webb, drove middle class reformers into the East End in the 1880s with unprecedented fervor. No longer passive toward the problems of urban poverty and crime, the bourgeoisie found for itself a new mission to regulate health, morals, and education among the destitute, to “humanize” them with culture, and to submit them to a vastly more intense social surveillance. Some of the apparatus for social intervention had been building for decades, in the creeping penetration of sanitary and housing regulations, in health inspection, and in laws requiring school attendance by the children of the poor. This was state intervention—the extension of the policies of nineteenth-century liberalism in opposition to the laissez-faire tradition. There had also been citizen intervention, primarily by charitable bodies and by the churches and their missions. In the 1880s, however, these forces acquired a heightened intensity, fired by a new zeal to rehabilitate the human sensibilities of the downtrodden who endured lives of meanness and futility, and haunted by a consciousness of a crisis in the capitalist social order.

That crisis is what Beatrice Webb meant by a sense of sin. “The origin of the ferment is to be discovered in a new consciousness of sin among men of intellect and men of property;” she wrote in My Apprenticeship (1926), the first volume of her partially completed autobiography, “a consciousness at first philanthropic and practical—Oastler, Shaftesbury and Chadwick; then literary and artistic—Dickens, Carlyle, Ruskin and William Morris; and finally analytic, historical and explanatory—in his latter days John Stuart Mill; Karl Marx and his English interpreters. . . . When I say the consciousness of sin, I do not mean the consciousness of personal sin. . . . The consciousness of sin was a collective or class consciousness; a growing uneasiness, amounting to conviction, that the industrial organization, which had yielded rent, interest and profits on a stupendous scale, had failed to provide a decent livelihood and tolerable conditions for a majority of the inhabitants of Great Britain.”

Webb’s autobiography, one of the most compelling works of the nineteenth century, addresses the social and economic structure of England itself, those essential relations and processes that had been elided in the sensationalizing and sentimentalizing accounts of the poor. The dysfunctions of gross inequality are, in her view, symptoms of laissez-faire capitalism. Written from her perspective, in later life, as one of the most prominent figures of the Fabian Socialist movement, as a proselytizer for repeal of the Poor Law, and as an uncompromising member of a Royal Commission on the problem, Webb’s autobiogra-
phy records what she calls the “Time-Spirit” of the 1880s which brought to the amelioration of urban poverty a new set of sociological and “scientific” methods and, in her hands, an awareness of the roots of destitution in capitalist excess and classism.

“Sin” is a term of personal spirituality rather than of collective responsibility. It is not surprising to encounter it in Victorian social analysis, of course, for the chiefly Protestant religious ethos resounds through English political discourse, from Carlyle and Ruskin to the voices of imperialism. Beatrice Webb appears to have adopted the term from the remark of Samuel Barnett, rector of St. Jude’s, Whitechapel and founder of Toynbee Hall, who said, “the sense of sin has been the starting point of progress” in the fight against poverty. But it has a deeper resonance in Webb’s vocabulary, for it touches the vital nerve of her personal relation to capitalism, class, and social duty, and to her struggle for self-definition as a woman.

Webb’s story of her life cannot be told without elaborating the influences on her from a childhood in the most secure realms of mid-Victorian capitalism. The first chapter of My Apprenticeship, entitled “Character and Circumstance,” begins with the contention that “the sociologist . . . is in a quite unique manner the creature of his environment. Birth and parentage, the mental atmosphere of class and creed in which he is bred, the characteristics and attainments of the men and women who have been his guides and associates, come first and foremost of all the raw material upon which he works, alike in order of time and in intimacy of contact” (1). These influences, for her, are her grandfathers who “rose rapidly to affluence and industrial power, one as a Manchester cotton warehouseman, the other as a Liverpool merchant trading with South America,” classic tales of the formation of the English middle class in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Beatrice’s parents, Richard and Lawrencina Potter, initially set themselves up in life as rentiers, living off inherited income, devoting themselves to leisure, culture, and community good works. The financial crisis of 1847–48 wiped away the major portion of Richard’s inheritance, so he was obliged to enter into a career as “a capitalist at large.” Impatient with everyday office work, he instead flourished as a man with “a taste for adventurous enterprise and a talent for industrial diplomacy” (3). Starting by acquiring a franchise to sell depreciated timber in his lumber yard for wooden huts for soldiers in the Crimean War, he entered a career of financial speculation and the administration of public companies—many of a highly romantic nature, such as the Grand Trunk Railway of Canada, and an abortive scheme to build
a Grand Canal through Syria to compete with the Suez Canal (which would have entailed submerging of scores of holy places). “Memory recalls a maze of capitalist undertakings of which he was director or promoter; undertakings of every degree of rank and permanence, of success or failure,” writes Beatrice. Richard Potter epitomized “advanced Capitalism,” the speculator and deal maker, the manager of enterprises put together with venture capital, the man with the political and financial contacts to secure franchises and to operate beyond the scope of conventional trade or manufacturing. And Beatrice adored him.

She confesses a pull at times toward the attractions of privilege. Raised like her sisters to combine the best of a young woman’s education with the attractions of the London season, herself a beautiful woman of wide intellectual interests, and clearly a stimulating conversationalist, she is candidly conscious of her ingrained disposition toward the life of moneyed security that is enjoyed by the upper middle class. The young woman who will serve as a rent collector in one of the worst slums of the East End as part of a systematic attempt to record and scientifically analyze conditions there must always take into consideration the degree to which her own “character” is molded by such “circumstances.”

Her inner struggle accounts in part for the highly personal terms—of “sin”—by which she defines social problems. At various points in her autobiography a dialectic is set up between her two “Egos”; she speaks of “the deep-lying controversy between the Ego that affirms and the Ego that denies, upon the issue, which was continuously present in my mind: Can we have a science of society, and if so, will its conclusions be accepted as a guiding light in public policy?” (187). Egoism alludes not only to the divisions within a Self that is fighting to establish its role in the world; it is a catchword in the mid-Victorian period for the evils of rampant individualism in a laissez-faire economy. For Beatrice Webb, the principal evil of capitalism appears to be excessive individualism. The “empirical Socialism” that she and other Fabians later espoused would work to curb those excesses through regulations and social awareness. The “annual increments of Socialistic legislation and administration,” inspired by the gathering of evidence of social ills and an ongoing debate in pamphlets, books, and reports, would produce “the slow but continuous retreat of the individualist forces” (178). Webb advocates, in other words, a conjunction of socialist legislation and moralistic reformism that will modify capitalism, curbing its “individualistic” or “egoistic” excesses while leaving the
basic structures of production and consumption intact. The personal “circumstances” of her own milieu, her life with Father-the-entrepreneur, can be sustained psychologically through this compromise—but only, as we shall see, at considerable psychic cost to herself. For she has transferred the site of contradiction away from the capitalism that her father embodies and onto herself as social mediator.

Science serves as the means by which Beatrice Webb can try to efface the mental and spiritual strains of this contradiction, and she grasps at it passionately as a neutral force that will submerge strife-torn human qualities in its objectivity. She devotes herself to Charles Booth’s great cataloguing of the “Life and Labour of the People of London,” in the comfort that “Charles Booth was, within my circle of friends, perhaps the most perfect embodiment of what I have described . . . as the mid-Victorian time-spirit—the union of faith in the scientific method with the transference of the emotion of self-sacrificing service from God to man” (214). The scientific method, particularly the empirical gathering of data, constitutes, as her comment indicates, a circuit for the directing of emotional energy. It channels the social and psychological conflicts that arise from Webb’s personal position, so that she is able to say of her commitment to Booth’s work that “the impulse came neither from politics nor from philanthropy, but from scientific curiosity; from the desire to apply the method of observation, reasoning and verification to the problem of poverty in the midst of riches” (209).

As crucial a role as the scientific spirit plays in Beatrice Webb’s early career when she was intensely involved with the urban poor of the East End, it is a deeply troubled concept. Her long devotion to the prominent social scientist Herbert Spencer, who was a close family friend and something of a mentor to her in her youth, her skeptical puzzling out of his *First Principles* and other theoretical works, the poignant account of her attendance at his bed during his last decline—all furnish a narrative of the problematic quality of science as a human guide. Spencer is for her an object lesson of the limitations of belief in science. He dies alone, unfulfilled, in her mind: a man who had devoted his life to an impersonal, abstract force that canceled out his own full subjectivity (30–31). Although she can pass off Spencer’s sad case as an instance of a man who had denied himself love and family, who was a flawed thinker, and who tried to fit everything into a predetermined thesis rather than work inductively, Webb is aware that science itself performs a problematic function in the displacement of the
underlying contradictions of the social order. In retrospect she is able to write, “it is hard to understand the naive belief of the most original and vigorous minds of the ‘seventies and ‘eighties that it was by science, and by science alone, that all human misery would be ultimately swept away” (126).

For social science, she realized, simply changes the terms—but not the nature—of the essential exploitations of bourgeois power. In her effort to probe the contradictions of her relation to her privileged family background, Webb asks, “This ignorance about the world of labor, did it imply class consciousness, the feeling of belonging to a superior caste? A frank answer seems worth giving. There was no consciousness of superior riches. . . . The consciousness that was present, I speak for my own analytic mind, was the consciousness of superior power. As life unfolded itself I became aware that I belonged to a class of persons who habitually gave orders, but who seldom, if ever, executed the orders of other people” (42). And later in her autobiography she asserts that “deep down in the unconscious herd instinct of the British governing class there was a test of fitness for membership of this most gigantic of all social clubs, but a test which was seldom recognized by those who applied it, still less by those to whom it was applied, the possession of some form of power over other people” (49).

A less personalized power is the primary element in what the Foucauldian social theorist Jacques Donzelot calls the “social.” The “social” comprises that set of institutions, discourses, and practices that developed in England, France, and the United States in the nineteenth century to regulate the health, education, familial relations, and living conditions of the working and lower classes. It embraces the panoply of social work, sanitation and health inspection, child care and care for expectant mothers, educational systems, counseling, family courts, and reformative and rehabilitative services that penetrated nearly every aspect of the family lives of the middle and lower strata of society. It is in many respects the great pride of the modern social order, for it has been responsible for the mitigation of ills and the improvement of life of those who have been most disempowered by the inequalities of the competitive system. But it necessarily causes a massive and systematic intervention by the state and the dominant classes into the everyday lives of the poor and the working class. Donzelot describes how educators, the family court judge, the psychologist/counselor, and the doctor, usually working in conjunction with the wife/mother, gradually strip the husband/father of much of his authority in the family and marriage. The shift in patriarchal power
is vividly illustrated in the tableau of the stern male judge interrogating and disciplining a wayward lower class child, while the father stands silent and impotent, cap in hand, in the courthouse audience.

The net effect of such an expansion of social intervention is to circumscribe the loose, clan-oriented, life of the lower classes, and to attempt to organize them into nuclear family units that can be more easily fitted into a bourgeois social system. The lower orders are compelled and induced to adopt the values of the middle class (although we will see in the next chapter how strong the resistance could be), ranging from reverence for the sanctity of the family and the nurturing of the child to the emulation of consumer desires. Although the laissez-faire capitalist system put into place a number of laws and social institutions that would eventually constrain its own freedom to operate, it nonetheless established moral and social authority over potentially disruptive classes, and began to ingrain in them a belief in bourgeois values of education, social order, obedience to state authority, and the family as an ethical center. And it did so in the name of values and principles that seem to lie outside of class and politics. Social regulations for health, education, family preservation, and so on are rarely seen as instruments for the preservation of the dominant economic and social order; they seem to address “universal” needs and aspirations of all people for a decent, comfortable existence and a chance for individual improvement. This is not to say that they do not, in most cases, have those positive effects, but the depoliticizing of the exercise of power constitutes one of the prime advantages of the “social” for the hegemonic class. It was a concept that could be, in fact, embraced in principle by all ranges of the political spectrum, from the conservatives to the socialists. Depoliticization was further enhanced by the application of “scientific methods” to the sphere of social intervention, chiefly in the rise and reorientation of the social sciences such as sociology, psychology, and economics.4

As Amanda Anderson has recently argued, the aspiration toward detachment that underwrites these efforts is far from a wholly negative phenomenon. Whether in the form of Dickens’ cosmopolitanism, evident in his novels of the 1850s and 60s, in the argument for exalted feminine social and moral agency offered by Ruskin in “Of Queen’s Gardens” (1864), or in the ironic detachment of Matthew Arnold or Oscar Wilde, the attempt to stand outside self-interest brings the ironic form of cultural critique together with the nonironic forms. Both articulate an aspiration toward detachment that cannot be easily reduced to ideological situatedness. That said, though, it is nonetheless difficult
not to see, from the perspective of the present, at least some, if not all, of the more earnest attempts at cultural redemption of the poor in the late nineteenth century as taking significant steps beyond mere scientific description to coercive behavioral modification on a grand scale. No matter how pure the individual motives that drove them, no matter how necessary amelioration might have been, these efforts amounted ultimately to an unprecedented interference of middle class reformers in the lives of lower class people.

That the East End became a site of significant social surveillance is beyond question. The writer Thomas Burke, who grew up in Limehouse, notes in his somewhat nostalgic autobiography *The Wind and the Rain* (published the year before Webb’s *Autobiography*) that the panoptical gaze was ever present to the East London poor of the late nineteenth century:

> We were like private soldiers, whose whole lives are spent in public. Every moment of our days was known to the officials, and if one of the old men asked, ‘What has Brown or Smith been doing to-day?’ he would have been supplied with a detailed report of Brown’s and Smith’s bodily activities from eight to eight. (*The Wind and the Rain* 71)

Burke’s awareness of the reality of social surveillance is convincing evidence of its presence, as he was neither a socialist committed to documenting the grounds for class warfare nor an Arthur Morrison committed to an aesthetic project of constructing a landscape of hopeless violence and misdirected resistance. There is little question but that the Education Act of 1870 required an acceleration of social surveillance unprecedented in English history. In fact, a later book of Burke’s (*The Real East End*, 1933) is dedicated to challenging the commonly-held “legend” of East End life by presenting an alternative picture of his own experience of ethnic and class diversity, supportive, clan-based families, and positive social relationships founded on different, more “elemental,” interpersonal exchanges. However, to discuss the relationship between the middle classes and their representations of the urban poor requires one to hold in mind these antithetical theses: (1) that these middle class representations were often high-minded, and sometime noble, attempts to understand poverty and to ameliorate its effects and (2) that they often reflect the coercive nature of middle class philanthropy and scientific understanding embodied in state institutions and private philanthropy—the power of the “social.” The two assertions wash together.
In England, the social sciences came of age—took on the shape and principles that essentially defined them in the twentieth century—in response to the specter of urban slum conditions. Something so dreadfully wrong with the social order as the suffering, unemployment, brutishness, and apathy that one witnessed in the East End and elsewhere signified an infirmity in the body politic, and in the analysis and theorization of modern societies. Among the most influential of the new social theorists was the economist Alfred Marshall, Professor of Political Economy at Cambridge, author of the *Principles of Economics* (1890), and the seminal influence on economic thinking and teaching from the 1880s to the 1920s. His students are said to have filled half the chairs in the field in the United Kingdom, and he and they exercised immense influence on government and business. Marshall, who had originally intended to enter the Anglican clergy, and who “had come into economics out of ethics,” according to his own account, essentially discarded the old economics of Malthus, Adam Smith, and Ricardo, with their theories premised on the distribution of wealth (Soffer 72). Marshall was moved by the challenge of poverty—its waste of human potential—and called first for a systematic *empirical* analysis of economic conditions: the fact-gathering that Beatrice Webb calls the scientific method. Accumulation and examination of data was not enough, however, for it must be pursued by a set of policies that will redeem the lost human resources of society, that will provide a rational means for opportunities to bring those people into the work force and the consuming public.

Marshall’s redirection of economic thought and practice aligns it with the “social” in Donzelot’s sense. For the impetus behind his beliefs is the exercise of ethical power: a determination to bring the treatment of the downtrodden into the ethical continuum of the English middle class. While his work constitutes a critique of the malformations of the capitalist society, it is in no way a rejection of that society. On the contrary, for Marshall the objective of economic reform is to bring the lower classes into the capitalist orbit. A firm devotee of the work ethic, he argued that labor was the primary means for achieving dignity and self-respect; social “good lies mainly in that healthful exercise and development of faculties which yields happiness without pall” (quoted in Soffer 78). Post-Darwinian biology had taught that environment and circumstances shaped development, so economic policy should create an opportunity for those who were less fortunate to realize themselves. Realization, Marshall believed, would be in middle class terms achieving a “standard of Comfort” that he equated to...
the life of a middle class “gentleman” (Soffer 75–79). Indeed, she suggests that Marshall, perhaps in keeping with the shifts of capitalism in the late nineteenth century, considered people more in terms of consumers than of producers. Donzelot argues that, in fact, one of the consequences of the emphasis on family and on bourgeois values generally in the reforms of the “social” is to create the mentality of the twentieth-century petit bourgeois: that marginal segment at the bottom of the middle class which is characterized by its overinvestment in family life, its narrow sense of economy, its fascination with education, its slavish envy of the upper class, and its frantic consumer desires (Donzelot 93).

Marshall advocated a more general redress of the conditions of poverty, but in many respects his emphasis on realizing the potential of the faceless poor shares some of the selectivism of the program of the Charity Organization Society, the largest and most well known of the private restoration efforts of the period. Headed by Octavia Hill, the COS was designed to put an end to “indiscriminate” almsgiving. Hill and others argued—and it was a venerable doctrine in English debates on charity—that open-handed giving to the poor corrupted both the receiver and the giver. It cultivated “deceitfulness, servility and greed” in the poor, demoralizing them and their families, and robbing them of the incentive to improve themselves. It not only frittered away the resources of the giver, but created false virtue and false comfort. The COS set itself up to weed out the deserving and undeserving, and to regularize the distribution of charity. Beatrice Webb saw through the hypocrisy of the COS almost immediately. First, it was foolish to attribute, as many of its spokespersons did, the persistence of poverty to indiscriminate and unconditional doles. Secondly, the COS policy of giving only to those who were most “deserving” broke down almost at once, because the most deserving were often those who suffered from chronic illnesses or injuries which prevented them from working. Since helping them would entail expensive and prolonged medical treatment, or unending support in many cases, the COS decided to put its money elsewhere. The criterion was changed: “the test is not whether the applicant be deserving but whether he is helpable” (195). The “unhelpable” were thrown back onto the Poor Law.

The social interventions into the world of urban poverty were always beset with these contradictions, in part because most of the schemes were candidly designed to shore up competitive capitalism, and in part because many of the most impassioned workers among the poor were torn by their own doubts about the order—or at least trou-
bled by their ambivalence toward it. In summarizing the failure of the COS, Beatrice Webb writes, “By rudely tearing off the wrappings of medieval almsgiving disguising the skeleton at the feast of capitalist civilization, they had let loose the tragic truth that, wherever society is divided into a minority of ‘Haves’ and a multitude of ‘Have Nots,’ charity is twice cursed, it curseth him that gives and him that takes. . . .

For human relationships, whether between individuals, groups or races, do not thrive in an emotional vacuum; if you tune out fellow-feeling and the common consciousness of a social equity, you tune in insolence, envy and ‘the wrath that is to come’” (196–97). Those emotional, almost spiritual, registers of the experiences of Webb and others in social work in the London slums must be gauged, for what is at stake is self-definition, the construction of a certain type of subjectivity.

Beatrice Webb’s autobiography and her diary are significant documents because they not only record the agonies of such self-construction with great insight and honesty—and because, as we have noted, she recognizes the implication of her capitalist origins in that process—but also because they are the expressions of a woman. As we discussed in the first chapter, the male construction of poverty emphasized the threat of a feminine abject in sensationalized accounts. Beyond that, however, women become pivotal figures in the discourse of the “social” that we have identified. The focal point of the intervention of social services and regulations is the family. Donzelot argues that the family is the site at which the dominant social order enacts its transformations, and yet it is also the object of criticism by that order (Donzelot 53). Its “failures” and inadequacies elicit the involvement of social services. Increasingly over the course of the century an ideal of the nuclear family becomes a “normative” unit against which everything is measured. Donzelot and others see in this the influence of the rising middle class, whose relations of production and consumption are organized around the family and its gendered division of labor, and which ethicizes and emotionalizes the family for the purposes of class preservation and control (as we observed in the principle of privatization), of gender discrimination, and as a means of reproducing itself through the nurturance and education of children. Indeed, Donzelot argues that the family is essentially constructed as a social organism throughout the century; it is given a hallowed status retroactively, enhancing its status as the “natural” state of human relations.

At the heart of the family is the woman. Donzelot observes that “the transformation of the family was effected with the active participation of women, for they disseminated the principles of the medical
and teaching professions into the home, helped win adherence to new norms, and produced a revaluation of power relationships between men and women.” All the areas that were woman’s domain—child raising, hygiene, moral education—in the bourgeois code of the nuclear family were made into pressure points for the intervention of the state. She served as the means for the interchange of private and public values. She was, after all, the ethical figure through which the ethicizing of the “social” could occur. As social intervention became more professionalized later in the century, the woman acted as the mediating element; it was she who took the children to the doctor and who dealt with the school authorities, and it was she who was often favored in family counseling and family courts later in the century.

But the relative empowerment of the woman was not without its costs. The woman was often the target of social intervention. Her practices in raising children and maintaining a decent home were examined, criticized, and “reformed.” A recurrent pattern in accounts of urban poor and working-class life presents us with a slovenly or dispirited wife and mother, sometimes a casually immoral one, and one of the silent premises of social reform is that the father and husband is held less responsible for home values. The woman thus occupies an uneasy double role: as mediator of the public efforts at reform, and as object of that reform. To the extent that the “social” is a feminized discourse—a feminized space, as Denise Riley notes, because its concerns are those of health, education, hygiene, fertility, demography, chastity, and fecundity—the woman functions as interrogator of her own role and being. “‘Women’ both come under and direct the public gaze in the later nineteenth century as sociological subjects in a double sense,” Riley observes. “Studies of poverty and of family life, of ‘social conditions,’ are from the 1880s to the 1930s frequently explained as the ravages of deprivation on the family whose pivot and heart is ‘the working-class woman,’ who may also be represented as its ignorant saboteur” (Riley 50). Finally, the “social” generally, and what is known as “social work” specifically, are often set out as appropriate vocations for women: activities in which an enterprising middle class or upper class wife, or one of the growing body of unmarried “odd women” or spinsters in nineteenth century England, might engage.

Beatrice Webb’s description of her work in the East End, principally as a rent collector for the Katherine Buildings, a housing project designed for the poor, illustrates the ambiguous state of a woman—in this case an upper middle class woman—who acts as mediating figure in the sphere of the “social.” She is not, of course, a direct target of the
social intervention, but she is deeply affected by her role as an instrument of it. Webb, in fact, welcomed the depersonalizing, instrumental qualities of it. For one thing, it seemed to channel energies that otherwise would go into unproductive, wayward directions of high society life, desultory study, specific attachments: "There is so much spare time in my life, it must be filled somehow. If I were, in a fit of discouragement, to throw up everything (for if I gave up my aim it would mean this with me, I couldn’t do purposeless work) I should become miserably restless, probably give way to some strong feeling and find my own nature too much for me" (Diary 114). Work among the poor substitutes for the religious faith that she has discarded. She shares, it seems, like many others of her generation, the faith that the "scientific method," the gathering of data on the conditions of urban poverty, will have ethical value in itself. One of the allures of empiricism in the nineteenth century was its apparent capacity to be more than simply a method. Empirical observation and fact-gathering by a dispassionate "professional" established a base for ethics. The more one knows about other people, their feelings, needs, and lives, the greater is the potential enlargement of one's own sympathetic powers. Behind the fetishization of empirical study of the poor in the nineteenth century lies, one suspects, a vestige of the belief that the acts of knowledge and appropriation themselves enlarge and transform human nature. The empirical observer becomes a better person.

The model for such social investigation was, for Webb, the work of her cousin-in-law Charles Booth, whose monumental multi-volume survey and classification of the strata of the metropolis, Life and Labour of the People of London, was begun with the East End, the subject of the first volume, published in 1889. Webb worked as a researcher for Booth's project during her stint in the slums. Booth categorizes the people into eight strata, listed A through H: "A. The lowest class of occasional labourers, loafers, and semi-criminals. B. Casual earnings—‘very poor.’ C. Intermittent earnings and D. Small regular earnings, together the ‘poor.’ E. Regular standard earnings—above the line of poverty. F. Higher class labour. G. Lower middle class. H. Upper middle class." He calculated the percentage of the total city population of each group—Class A he reckoned at 11,000 or 1¼ percent of the population—and provided a wealth of data about marriages, jobs, housing situations, class mobility, and so on.

Booth was an eminently humane man, and cross-verified his figures and observations through sources such as health inspectors and education officers who regularly worked in the East End. But his project also
contributes to an abstraction of the condition of the poor. We understand, of course, that Booth is not attempting to provide a full picture of urban life, of the causes of poverty, of class relations. His is only data-gathering, a preliminary work as it were, toward other forms of representation, although Philip Abrams points out that when Booth began his project he was interested in more than the collection of data; he was concerned with the structural processes of poverty (Abrams 84). It aids in establishing, nonetheless, a vision of urban life that Jameson and others identify as one of classification (Jameson 190).

Representations of the urban poor in a novel such as Bleak House cannot be separated from the anxieties of the bourgeois male over his social role, the displacement of the competitive ethos, or the construction of the middle class female subject. In the classificatory mode of 1880s social science, there is an attempt to divide out such factors, to make the issues independently addressable, even if the impetus in men like Alfred Marshall and Charles Booth is reformist. Booth’s scientific method, in its effort to purge the topic of the distortions of other forms of representation, has provided us with an incomplete representation. It lacks the totalizing quality, to use Georg Lukács’ term, of the Dickensian version, and, as we shall see, it paves the way for the reification of the poor in late nineteenth-century science fiction and tales of the “abyss.”

Beatrice Webb plunges herself into a relentless, punishing round of work in the slums of the East End. “Working hard,” she records in her diary on June 4, 1885. “May have some rough work to do, but am gaining experience. When over-tired, the tenants haunt me with their wretched, disorderly lives” (D 134). On September 14, she sighs, “Oh so tired. Struggling through the end of my work with painful effort. The old physical longing for the night that knows no morning” (D 138). And, indeed, this account for November 15 chronicles a life in which she is giving herself no quarter:

15 November. Worked well. Monday, Katherine Buildings, one to nine o’clock. Afterwards saw over Whittington Club. . . . Tuesday at Katherine Buildings book, 4 hours. Wednesday Albert and Victoria Docks from 10 P.M. to 6 A.M. Thursday, idle morning castle-building—afternoon, Katherine Buildings. Friday, 7 hours’ work at Katherine Buildings book. Saturday, Katherine Buildings 12 to 7 o’clock. Forty hours’ work including railway journeys. (D 143)
Webb’s life of duty would be difficult enough to sustain physically, but it is also undermined by the self-doubt that keeps reappearing in her early self-confessions and that makes it such a compelling account. “Shall I always disappoint myself and others when my strength comes to be tested; or will my strength increase and enable me to carry out what I intend?” (263). Her social work is more than a test of endurance to her; it is a test of character. “I have a much greater show of ability than reality,” she decides, “arising from my audacity of mind and plausible way of putting things. My dear old Father, I am a sort of weak edition of you!” (266). She examines her motives: “Earnestly hope I shall never get conceited again, or look upon my work as more than the means for remaining contented and free from pain. Relief to be alone . . . Trust I shall never make social capital out of my work. That with me is a danger . . . and the ‘vanity motive’ comes in to strengthen desire” (256). Her scientific approach to her task, always trying to keep a book describing the individual cases, so that work will not simply be a routine, but will be the base for social scientific observation—the self-imposed rigor of this sustains her while the actual encounters with another sphere of life, with the poor, prompts only (as we have seen hinted) a confused distaste and sympathy.

For this representative of the middle class urban social worker battles between a determination to bring science, will, and intellect to bear on the major social ills of the day—an effort that she deliberately abstracts into an impersonal empirical/analytical operation—and her own attractions toward the upper middle class sphere from which she comes. The choice often appears to her to be one between social scientific work, and love and marriage. At the end of her stint at Katherine Buildings, Webb has reached a nadir of despair. It is compounded by her father’s stroke and invalidism (for she devotes herself to nursing him), and her younger sister Rosy’s anorexia nervosa, but it is also a resignation to spinsterhood. “It will be a sad life; God grant it may be a useful one, that I may dedicate myself earnestly and without trembling to search after the truth which will help my people. There is no inflation now. I have not despised the simple happiness of a woman’s life; it has despised me and I have been humbled as far down as a woman can be humbled” (D 160). In her autobiography, in a section headed “The Dead Point,” she states, “The sympathetic reader may have noted a black thread of personal unhappiness woven into the texture of my observations on East End life. From the entries in my diary I gather
that I saw myself as one suffering from a divided personality; the normal woman seeking personal happiness in love given and taken within the framework of a successful marriage; whilst the other self claimed, in season and out of season, the right to the free activity of ‘a clear and analytic mind’” (270). Here we have the ideal of detachment—implicitly associated with masculine activity in the public sphere—juxtaposed against the ideal of a “normal” emotional life for a woman. In Webb, the two ideals have come to seem incompatible with one another.

My Apprenticeship makes almost no reference to any unhappy experiences in love for the young Beatrice Potter. But from the diaries we learn of courtship by Joseph Chamberlain, the charismatic Radical-Liberal leader who was one of the principal figures for social reform, and whose split with Gladstone in 1885 over the issue of Irish Home Rule led to the break-up of the Liberal party. The romance, or at least negotiations relating to it, stretched on in an unsatisfactory and desultory fashion over many months, but in her diary entry for January 12, 1884, Beatrice Webb, by her account, at least, had concluded that it would be a destructive match for her. After dinner,

By a silent arrangement we find ourselves in the garden. “It pains me to hear any of my views controverted,” and with this preface he begins with stern exactitude to lay down the articles of his political creed. I remain modestly silent; but noticing my silence he remarks that he requires “intelligent sympathy” from women. “Servility, Mr. Chamberlain,” think I, not sympathy, but intelligent servility; what many women give men, but the difficulty lies in changing one’s master, in jumping from one tone of thought to the exact opposite—with intelligence. And then I advanced as boldly as I dare my feeble objections to his general proposition, feeling that in this case I owe it to the man to show myself and be absolutely sincere. He refutes my objections by reasserting his convictions passionately, his expression becoming every minute more gloomy and determined. (D 102)

Webb went on in the entry to analyze correctly the limitations of Chamberlain, those which led to his eventual failure as a leader: “He is neither a reasoner nor an observer in the scientific sense. He does not deduce his opinions by the aid of certain well-thought-out principles, from certain carefully-observed, ascertained facts. He aims, rather, at being the organ to express the desires of those he believes to be the majority of his countrymen” (103). Disappointment in love may be a
factor in this analysis, but we would be doing a disservice to Webb not to appreciate the intellectual and philosophical terms on which she premised their relationship—and saw their incompatibility of natures. Her principles, and her convictions about the necessity of adducing them from “carefully observed, ascertained facts,” turn this from a Jane Austenish account of pride and prejudice into a decision that demonstrates how much those ideals have come to constitute her essential self-construction. This is even more than the case of a young woman making a choice between a career and a marriage that would subordinate her; it is a decision affirming a thoroughly and rigorously thought out set of methods and purposes. The gender distinctions she is implicitly making here are complex and have no necessary relation to biological sex, as her critique of Chamberlain’s failure to achieve the ideal of detachment is measured by her own yardstick—as a woman who is fully aware of her own ability to do just what Chamberlain cannot.

Yet, under such circumstances, how can work in the slums not serve in some way as a surrogate for feminine desire, a suppression or rerouting of it? Webb keeps circling back in her reflections on this time to the effects upon a woman of a life given to social work among the destitute. She muses about her fellow workers:

But it is no use shutting one’s eyes to the fact that there is an increasing number of women to whom a matrimonial career is shut, and who seek a masculine reward for masculine qualities. There is in these women something exceedingly pathetic, and I would do anything to open careers to them in which their somewhat abnormal but useful qualities would get their own reward. . . . At the best, their lives are sad and without joy or light-heartedness; they are now beginning to be deeply interested and warmed with enthusiasm. I think these strong women have a great future before them in the solution of social questions. (266–67)

She ponders the kinds of qualities—“feminine” and “masculine”—that are required for such service, and the limitations that each entails. Of Emma Cons, a philanthropist who showed qualities as a “governing and guiding woman,” she writes:

Unlike the learned woman, the emotional part of their nature is fully developed, their sympathy kept almost painfully alive. Their eyes are clear of self-consciousness and bright with love and the pity from
which it springs. They have the dignity of habitual authority. Often
they have the narrow-mindedness and social gaucherie of complete
absorption, physical and mental, in one set of feelings and ideas. The
pure organizer belongs to a different class. She is . . . to a certain extent
unsexed by the justice, push, and severity required. Not that I despise
these qualities; the former is indispensable in any work, but with the
manager it is more moral; with the organizer more technical justice.
Push and severity are not prominent qualities of the governing and
guiding woman. For the guidance of men by personal influence, feeling
more than thought is required. (D 136–37)

For a woman to persevere in the East End some stiffening of nature
and refocusing of elements of one’s mind and feelings is required. The
daily encounter with such appalling wretchedness, with the shiftlessness
and evasion and dispiritedness, acts in disorienting ways upon
the woman who binds herself to fulfill the missions of an upper society
that is ethically committed, yet frustrated, impatient with the almost
hopeless tasks before it. Webb cannot always contain her revulsion.
She writes in her diary on November 8, 1886:

But this East End life, with its dirt, drunkenness and immorality,
absence of co-operation or common interests, saddens me and weighs
down my spirit. I could not live down here; I should lose heart and
become worthless as a worker. And practical work does not satisfy me;
it seems like walking on shifting sand . . .

Where is the wish for better things in these myriads of beings hurry-
ing along the streets night and day? Even their careless, sensual laugh,
coarse jokes, and unloving words depress one as one presses through
the crowd, and almost shudders to touch them. It is not so much the
actual vice, it is the low level of monotonous and yet excited life; the
regular recurrence to street sensations, quarrels and fights; the greedy
street-bargaining, and the petty theft and gambling. The better natures
keep apart from their degraded fellow-citizens and fellow-workers,
live lonely and perforce selfish lives, not desire to lead their more igno-
rant and unself-controlled neighbors. (267)

At times she is coldly critical: “We all designate them as on the whole a
leisure class; picking up their livelihood by casual work, poor in quali-
ty; by borrowing from their more industrious friends, and by petty
theft.” The beggars are “as a class, in a purely business relationship in
which no other moral principle enters than that of fulfilling con-
tracts—hopelessly unsatisfactory” (261). These encounters produce in her a withholding of feeling, perhaps a disavowal of it, that she finds deeply troubling. She admits in her autobiography that she was described as “a rather hard and learned woman, with a clear and analytic mind,’ so records a brilliant journalist.” Her defense is that “to me ‘a million sick’ have always seemed actually more worthy of self-sacrificing devotion than the ‘child sick in a fever’ preferred by Mrs. Browning’s Aurora Leigh” (249–50).

Webb’s moments of attachment always have that abstract, principled cast to them, for social service tied to scientific investigation partakes of some larger dispassionate spirit that is also heavy-handed in its manner. This is so, even in affirmations of the ethical obligation itself: “One thing is clear to my mind, it is distinctly advantageous to us to go amongst the poor. We can get from them an experience of life which is novel and interesting; the study of their lives and surroundings gives us the facts wherewith we can attempt to solve the social problems; contact with them develops on the whole our finer qualities, disgusting us with our false and worldly application of men and things and educating us in a thoughtful benevolence” (D 85). The leap of sympathy never quite seems to occur; rather, Webb looks on with curiosity not only about these pathetic specimens of social and self-ruin, but also in a bemused way about her own ambiguous and strangely muted, depressed responses:

20 May. Visited this morning Pavey (C.O.S. case), Had been dispenser, took to opium eating, now unfitted for work. Wife earning 15s a week, has to support him and three children . . . Still clings to her baby, poor woman. ‘Why should I be separated from my children as if I were a bad woman? What will they think of me? . . . I cannot bear it much longer; I must give way.’ The wretched man, standing sulkily in the corner, twisting his thumbs, cursing the existing order of things, talking of his better days and good education, could write well, talk and translate French, had a smattering of Greek and Latin. All to no purpose! One is tempted to a feeling of righteous indignation against the man, but did he not make himself wretched and is he not on the whole more pitiable? Look at the two faces. An expression on the one of dogged discontent and misery, ever present disgust of the world and himself; marking the woman’s face, deep lines of unselfconscious effort, of perhaps agonizing struggle, agonizing in those moments when she felt herself face to face with the fact that in the end she must succumb; but still she loved, and the little one for whom she is giving away strength,
and maybe life, smiles sweetly and stretches its tiny arms longingly towards her. (D 86)

Such distanced despair, and such a scene of enervating desolation, acquires in the workers among the netherworld of the 1880s the quality of experience in an almost alien landscape. East London was often, during this period, likened to a colonial land, but nowhere more luridly than in William Booth’s In Darkest England and The Way Out (1890). Booth (no relation to Charles) was the founder and leader of the Salvation Army, one of the most energetic organizations in the slums. He begins his book on the problems of urban poverty by invoking the highly popular newspaper reportage by Henry Morton Stanley of his trip through the densest jungles of Africa. The expedition was an exhausting, terrifying trek through treacherous undergrowth, where no sunlight reached the ground, and the only sounds were those of falling trees and the appalling thunder-bursts and their echoes, a realm of dampness, gloom, chill, and disease—and of ever-present danger, from snakes, insects, wild animals, and perhaps from the cannibalistic pygmies. Booth then draws a parallel with the East London slums:

The Equatorial Forest traversed by Stanley resembles that Darkest England of which I have to speak, alike in its vast extent—both stretch, in Stanley’s phrase, “as far as from Plymouth to Peterhead;” its monotonous darkness, its malaria and its gloom, its dwarfish de-humanized inhabitants, the slavery to which they are subjected, their privations and their misery. That which sickens the stoutest heart, and causes many of our bravest and best to fold their hands in despair, is the apparent impossibility of doing more than merely to peck at the outside of the endless tangle of monotonous undergrowth; to let light into it, to make a road clear through it, that shall not be immediately choked up by the ooze of the morass and the luxuriant parasitical growth of the forest—who dares hope for that? At present, alas, it would seem as though no one dares even to hope! It is the great Slough of Despond of our time. (W. Booth 12–13)

Booth echoes, although in a grandiloquent way, the despair that Beatrice Webb expressed in the midst of her venture into the slums. The waves of defeatism that engulf even the most “stout-hearted” of the workers among the urban poor record not only the immensity of the task before them, but the alienation that lies at the heart of the entire relationship. “Darkest England” is a figure of speech, a
metaphor, for the extensive disavowal of the inter-relations of class identity and personal self-definition, and of economic structures and individual effects, which only can provide us with an integrated and “total” representation of the condition. The parallel to Africa is a pure gesture of reification, containing perhaps traces of the male middle class fantasy discourse that we discussed from the 1840s and 1850s, but essentially displaced from the dynamics of middle class self-definition.

Culturalist Philanthropy and Its Civilizing Mission

William Booth, like Webb, was a figure caught up in attempted class mediation, and, like her, he sought to efface it by asserting an overriding ethical imperative. Even here, though, the difference is telling, for Booth’s religious mission is itself reified, bound up in his design of the Salvation Army itself—the discipline, the self-denial, the uniforms, the religious fervor. And his “solution” to urban poverty was to evacuate the poor into work camps in the country or to transport them abroad—to bundle them off as one would a cartload of broken objects.

In both William Booth and Beatrice Webb the ethical imperative, undertaken in full conviction of its necessity and (in Booth’s case) its righteousness, engenders a withering of enthusiasm as it encounters the bleak prospects of real poverty. Both employ imagery of the deadening of sensibility—in Webb’s case explicitly linked to the sacrifices of womanly desire that are the price one pays for social service in the East End. Booth’s sensationalized vision of Darkest England, which was apparently touched up by none other than W. T. Stead, projects its morality with militant Christian energy, but even in his account there is a stultification of spirit in both the reformer and the figure of urban poverty. The personal self-image of the middle class social worker falters at this moment, and the class’s imagination dwells on a picture of desolation. This permeation of affect into both the upper class observer and the scene of his or her effort is best embodied in a novel by Margaret Harkness, entitled A City Girl (1887).

Harkness was Beatrice Webb’s second cousin and very close friend; the two went on a trip to Austria in 1884 after Webb’s emotional crisis over Chamberlain, and Harkness introduced Beatrice to Sidney Webb, who became her husband and intellectual partner. Harkness actually lived in the Katherine Buildings during the 1880s, and wrote a series of novels about the slums under the pseudonym of John Law. Relatively
little is known about her, and even about her political positions, for
although she was a socialist during the 1880s, and helped in the Dock
Workers’ Strike, she was often critical of socialists in her fiction, and
apparently turned against socialism in the next decade. John Goode,
one of the few literary critics who have given her any notice, remarks,
“what we don’t know is whether she was a woman of consistent ideas
who worked opportunistically in a series of alliances (her own image of
herself), a radical feminist converted to socialism in the mid-1880s and
disillusioned by it in the early 1890’s, or simply a neurotic of wide but
volatile sympathies vacillating between seeing herself as a journalist in
pursuit of ‘cold-blooded copy’ and a rejected saviour of the working
class” (“Harkness” 49). She is perhaps most famous for the letter
Friedrich Engels sent her after reading A City Girl, in which he discuss-
es his preference for Balzac over Zola, and praises her for the “truth-
fulness of her presentation” of the conditions under which which the
proletariat suffer.

Her neglect as a literary figure is understandable on reading A City
Girl, for it is a strangely spare, uninflected novel. The story is a familiar,
almost starkly symbolic one, of a pretty slum girl named Nelly who
aspires to a more romantic existence. Nelly is casually seduced by a
West Ender named Arthur Grant, made pregnant, and ruined in health
and spirit. It is, as Engels noted, the classic rendition of the exploitation
of the poor by the callous rich—yet there are unsettling little differ-
ences: Nelly’s father was probably a West Ender himself; she aspires to
pleasures and beauty that are normally thought to be beyond the ken of
dispirited slum dwellers; Arthur Grant is a socialist and a novelist and,
ironically, a devoted family man, not your ordinary roué; and her
eventual rescuer is himself a man with a respectable military service
background, someone who nurtures his resources in order to better his
condition. Nelly shadows the sensibility of a victimized young woman
from a higher social class—perhaps of Harkness herself. The novel,
however, thwarts such subliminal readings, by denying Nelly any but
the most melodramatically stereotyped mental characteristics. Grant
reflects that “she was no psychological study, this little Whitechapel
girl, only something pretty to look at” (Harkness 76). Spoken, to be
sure, by a philandering seducer, who thinks that “‘hands’ have no
hearts,” but crudely true to the limitations with which she has been
rendered by Harkness.

For Nelly’s is a limited subjectivity in a realm of a limited scope,
inhabited by limited beings. A City Girl paints a landscape of spiritual
desolation, but one that cannot be quickened into dark nights of the
soul. The figure of religion, Father O’Hara, a Catholic priest who had suppressed the demon of unbelief by repressing his intellect and his feelings, represents the utter devastation of mind that one encounters in the East End. Whitechapel “is the land of dumb thought and dumb feeling” (Harkness 99), the narrator asserts, and this is what it truly is, a “land” of benumbed thought and feeling, a landscape of affect, the spatialized depiction of a state of mind. Scarcely a breath of vitality is stirring in our mental image of the novel; the characters are enervated and passive—even Nelly—and they are largely types, uninflected into particularity; the action is desultory and fatalistic; the underlying impulses of the text are stolidly repressed—Nelly’s pregnancy and the birth of her baby are only obliquely referred to, and sexuality is a casual diversion to the upper class and a wretched miscalculation for the poor.

The spatialized representation of the netherworld continues, in a sense, the figurations of miasma and labyrinth in which it had always been rendered: a combination of atmosphere and of physical setting that correlated well with theses of degeneration, and later naturalist notions of the effects of environment on character. But Nelly’s story is, in another sense, the story of Harkness’ and Webb’s alienation and depression, of the banking of their own fires of desire—and yet the stirring of them with the ghostly wisps of romances with men from their middle class backgrounds—and of the spiritual stultification that seems to set in upon those who sacrificed in these seemingly barren fields. The sparsely psychologized, relatively unmodulated figure of Nelly—almost as purely symbolic as the little girl sentinel of George Sims’ How the Poor Live—articulates the constriction of sensibilities, perhaps even the narrowing of the protagonist’s subjectivity that Georg Lukács described as a symptom of character driven by abstract ethical imperatives that cannot be realized in the exterior world (Lukács 65–66).

This landscape of affect was recast into the dominant public image of the East End in the 1880s by the most influential novelist on the subject, Walter Besant. Besant was one of the most popular and eminent novelists of the period, although he is mostly remembered now as the catalyst for Henry James’ essay on “The Art of Fiction.” The prominence of Besant is what prompted James to make him the object of his dialogue in his seminal essay on the principles of aesthetics and realism, and Besant’s prominence was in turn built on his presidency of the Society for Authors, his activity in seeking fairer contractual terms for writers, and his involvement in bringing the conditions of the East
End, as he saw them, to the attention of a vast middle class reading public. As Peter Keating has observed, Besant was as much a reformer as an artist, but the two aspects make an intriguing combination (Working Classes 94).

Besant characterized the East End as a vast desert of monotony and "meanness." He uses "mean" in the sense of lowly, abject, and ignoble, lacking any elevating qualities. For him, then, as well, all the communities and subcultures of the urban netherworld are characterized in terms of the affective nature of the quality of existence within them. When he writes East London in 1899, he transforms that quality of existence into a descriptive landscape, opening with a visual panorama of the area, a sort of walking tour, in which he defines it through what is absent:

It is a city full of churches and places of worship, yet there are no cathedrals . . . ; it has a sufficient supply of elementary schools, but it has no public or high school, and it has no colleges for the higher education and no university; the people all read newspapers, yet there is no East London paper except of the smaller and local kind. . . . In the streets there are never seen any private carriages; there is no fashionable quarter . . . (East London 8)

The East End is flattened, a cultural prairie, with no vital connection to its past, no sense of citizenship, no vitality. "Unlovely City," he hails it, "City of Dreadful Monotony."

Besant’s characterization of the East End as a place that parches the spirit is echoed by other observers, including, as we shall see in the next chapter, one of its inhabitants, Arthur Morrison, in his short story "Mean Streets." But Morrison’s larger picture is one of vitality, and that is confirmed by the Reverend A. Osborne Jay, who spent years in the worst sections, and who writes in his memoirs, A Story of Shoreditch: Being a Sequel to 'Life in Darkest London,' (1896), "I recollect once talking with a somewhat superficial observer as to the difficulties of work in East London, and being told that its chief feature is monotony. This, at least, is not characteristic of Shoreditch: to the uninitiated, life there, provided that they survived, would surely assume the appearance of a chronic surprise, and even to those fairly seasoned, there is never any lack of uncertainty" (Jay 47).

Besant may not have intended to deny the East End its manic violence, but he nonetheless presents to the "uninitiated" middle class reader a picture that omits all the local color, the busy culture of the
nether world. He provides his audience with a landscape of dull, unmotivated, shiftless grey figures, inured to poverty, slipping below the fully human. We are in a world of vacant subjectivity, a terrain in which very little desire stirs. While we could find links between this picture and the psychological states of women such as Beatrice Webb and probably Margaret Harkness—and thus could reasonably designate it as a site of affect—there is no such inflection of Besant’s sensibility. For the positive-thinking Besant, the subjective emptiness speaks not of him, nor of the ambivalences of his class, but of a social challenge: the need to create and nurture a subjectivity within the underclasses, to bring them into the hegemonic formation by providing them with cultural “being.” His mission among the downtrodden is to resuscitate desire, but within stipulated perimeters: a socially constructive, ethically bound, and materialistically realizable desire. He wants to foster the individual potentiality of the deprived worker in the East End. He wants, as he puts it in his Autobiography (1902), to show “the romance that lies beneath its monotony” (Autobiography 243).

In this project, Besant is more in line with the other great pattern of middle class intervention into the slums that took place in the 1880s. While Webb, Charles Booth, and their associates were trying to bring a systematic analysis to urban conditions, another wave of socially conscious upper middle class figures moved in (literally) to the East End with the mission of establishing individual human connections between the classes and of bringing culture to the poor. They were part of what became known as the settlement movement, or the Toynbee Hall movement (after the most famous settlement project). It was inspired by the ideas of a number of prominent academic figures, such as the philosopher T. H. Green, the cultural scholar Benjamin Jowett, and the historian Arnold Toynbee at Oxford, who argued that only through a more personal, individual contact between the upper classes and the underclasses could the urban poor and the lower working class acquire those traits of character that would enable them to improve themselves. In 1884 a Universities’ Settlement Association was set up, with the goal of establishing a series of residences in the East End, in which a select group of University men would live among and attempt to exert a personal influence upon slum dwellers and workingmen, through example and through cultural uplift. Within the next four decades 46 settlements were to be established in the United Kingdom, reaching an estimated total of 100,000 working class people (Rose, Edwardian Temperament 57).
The young men who joined in the initial forays of the settlement movement were the cream of the English upper middle classes. They were ready to devote themselves to public service, and many of them were out of the tradition of Thomas Arnold’s Rugby School, which aimed to prepare boys for a life of civic action and responsibility. They responded strongly to the dangers of social disintegration that had been brought on by some of the excesses of capitalism: the unequal distribution of wealth, the growing class resentments, the divisions between social strata. East London symbolized a social pathology: the loss of an English sense of community. They were chosen for this task because of their own aspirations to realize the best in themselves; here would be a cadre of dedicated and disinterested leaders who would teach workers how they might become part of the larger English community by cultivating their own higher qualities. This was bourgeois class mediation at its most explicit.

The spiritual leader of the settlement movement was T. H. Green, who could address the elements of religious doubt in many of the young men at Oxford in the 1870s, because “he had himself abandoned Christian orthodoxy in the 1860s,” the historian Standish Meacham tells us. Green argued that loss of belief in the outward manifestations of divine power did not require one to forsake the principles of Christianity. God was immanent in each man, “‘present in the believing love of him and the brethren, a Christ within us, a continual resurrection,’ which could be manifested in the subordinating of self to the needs of fellow human beings.” The doctrine of immanent divine qualities assigns to each individual an inner core of being that realizes itself in social duty. To serve the needs of social harmony is to be. Green’s ability to conceptualize ethics as being in this way attempts to prevent it from taking on the nature of an exteriorized duty, as it so often is for Beatrice Webb. Theoretically, class mediation and essence are melded together. And the terms of being are correlated more directly to bourgeois values in Green’s dictum that God was “the possible self.” Although the “possible self” evokes Arnoldian cultural theory, the “best self” that is altruistic, cultured, and idealistic, transcending materialism, it employs terms that are intrinsic to the middle class projective mentality that thinks ahead, that speaks of its own potentiality.

The ethos of the settlement house movement tries to correct one of the chief infirmities of other upper class interventions into the East End: the impersonality of it, the reifying qualities that attach to the treatment of individuals as objects of aid or of social interrogation. The
organizer of Toynbee House, the Reverend Samuel Barnett, had been an associate of Octavia Hill in the Charity Organization Society, and had for some years served in Whitechapel as rector of St. Jude’s, and he well appreciated the need for what he called a “one by one” approach to the poor. The young men from the universities who came to reside at Toynbee Hall were expected to develop personal relationships with members of the lower classes, and to provide them with living examples of the development of character and intellect. In such a relationship, Barnett proclaimed, the East Londoners “take in knowledge which they do not tabulate; they absorb thought as air, they consciously become more sympathetic, and lose the narrow views which kept them as a class apart. . . . The habits and tastes, therefore, which lie at the root of Poverty, Ignorance, and Sin, may best be met by the formation of other habits, which come through the example of persons, by the contact of man with man.”

Barnett’s theory of improvement by emulation, of “raising the buried life” that lies within even the most blighted of individuals, sounds very English in its individualistic emphasis. It purports to elide class distinctions by arguing that men are shaped by the limitations of circumstances. Yet the selection of Oxford and Cambridge men for the role of mentors reinforces a hierarchy of breeding and acculturation, even if it is a potentially mobile one. Indeed, many of the Oxbridge devotees to the settlement house project complained that they were made constantly conscious of their special backgrounds. And Meacham’s study indicates that the vast majority of the Londoners who attended settlement house events and profited by them were not of the poorest group but from upper working and lower middle classes (Meacham 58). Whitechapel itself was particularly resistant to the movement because it was made up of many transient workers and had a high level of the unskilled. Furthermore, the predominantly male composition of the settlement house movement identifies culturalism as a strategy with patriarchal overtones when used in dealing with the lower classes. We saw similar tendencies in the writing of journalists such as James Greenwood, whose “literary” rhetoric placed it squarely within the tradition of the patriarchal eighteenth century essay and whose partially gentrified class sensibility diminished the possibilities of the male journalist acting as an effective ethicizing force among the lower orders. Bringing cultivation to the heathen is, in certain respects, a moral mission, but for all of T. H. Green’s efforts to link culturalism and ethics, the movement has imperialistic overtones. Partly because of this, and partly because the movements toward cultural improvement
did not work, Arthur Morrison and George Gissing treated the settlement houses with contempt, as we shall see in chapter 3. Gissing, in particular, also recognized the potentially rigidifying self-contradictions that the strategy of culturalism caused in the middle class male.

The settlement house movement could also be faulted for its depoliticizing tendencies. The issues were not those of class conflict, supposedly, but of individual self-development. In such a scheme, anyone could realize his potential, given the right examples and opportunities, and political action or unionization by the underclasses only disrupted community and ruined the chances of one-on-one interaction and self-improvement. Of course, as we have noted, the effort was far from apolitical. The middle class desire for mediation prompted it, and the inculcation of upper class values and desires in the lower classes could only conclude in subjecting them to hegemonic control. The concept of hegemony is central to the success of the Western European and American middle class control over their social orders, for that control is achieved not through repressive force, but by convincing those who lack power and privilege to share in the values of those who have it. As long as the individuals in subordinate positions believe in the dominant social order’s rightness and naturalness, and only want to be part of it themselves, they will abide by its prescriptions. The problem was becoming equally acute with respect to the urban poor, for the emphases on the atavistic natures of these dwellers of the underworld, of their degeneration into less than full human beings, denied them individuality in this sense. At some level, the settlement house approach attempted to address this very crisis.

The writer Thomas Burke, whom we have already discussed, captures well the prevailing sense that the settlement house movement, as well as the work of all the other disciplinary agencies concerned with alleviating the social effects of poverty, actually undermined the autonomy of the poor through their invasive activities:

No pious youth from college ever seemed to think of doing a little Settlement work in Curzon Street or Portman Square. Always it was the defenceless, voiceless poor who were the victims of the whims and theories of the educated; and what with the District Visitor, the Provident Visitors, the School Board man, the curate, the Infant Welfare Visitor, and the Settlement Worker, our homes were far more public than any public-house. (The Wind and the Rain 26)
A self-proclaimed member of “the poor,” Burke, who depicts an East End far more open to the outer world than Morrison’s, was nonetheless dogged in his early life, not only by persistent hunger, but by constant reminders that the poor were always objects under surveillance by the well off—a source of potential danger to the people who employed them as servants or for day work. An exemplary East End figure who made a name for himself as a writer after years of struggle in dire poverty, Burke conveys a vision of East End life as more hopeful than certainly Arthur Morrison, whose work we will discuss in chapter 4, and far more energetic than the enervated landscapes of Harkness and Besant. It is also interesting to note that Burke’s interest in art and his opportunities to advance his writing skills were enabled, not by the efforts of exogenous middle class cultural philanthropy, but by an indigenous cultural institution with a close connection to the lives of the urban poor and working classes: the music hall.

And thus we are brought back again to Walter Besant, for in his vision the terms are most sharply drawn. From the desolate East End of meanness and monotony, from a site of absence—absence of churches, absence of places of recreation, absence of history, absence of subjectivity—we set about the task of constituting a “being” for the underclasses, or etching on that template the cultural sensibility that can replicate itself in the hegemonic order. This, for Besant, is the Great “Romance” that lies beneath the City of Dreadful Monotony. His widely read novel, All Sorts and Conditions of Men (1882) dramatizes that Romance as a romance, for at the heart of it is the love story of Angela Messenger, a graduate of Newnham College and heiress to the fortune of the Messenger Brewery, and Harry Goslett, a native of the East End, who was raised by an aristocrat as if he were a member of the upper classes, and who returns voluntarily to the slums to work as a joiner. Harry is an example of settlement house philosophy in action, for his lowly origins do not prevent him from attaining to all of the knowledge, personal style, and good breeding of the highest order. As his guardian, Lord Jocelyn puts it, “I expected you would take a rough kind of polish only—like nickel, you know, or pewter—and you turned out real silver. A gentleman, I thought, is born, not made. This proved a mistake” (All Sorts 160). Angela Messenger tries to prove out the best, most altruistic of the mediating impulses of the upper middle class, for she takes another name—Angela Kennedy—and establishes a dressmaking firm amidst the sweatshops on Whitechapel Road. This is no ordinary dressmaking establishment,
however, for the working conditions are elegant but simple, the girls break at intervals to play tennis in the specially built courts, or to exercise in their private gymnasium, then they are fed a hearty, healthy meal with real roast beef, they are read to as they work, and after a shortened day by East End standards, they are invited to stay on to dance in the ballroom, read in the library, or entertain their friends. In addition, they share in the firm’s profits.

The goal is to civilize these girls. By refining them, by exposing them to the pleasures of life, by teaching them to appreciate music and literature, and by surrounding them with pleasantness, Angela intends to make her employees aspire to something beyond their mean existences. “Unless they are discontented, there will be no improvement. Think . . . what it is that lifts men out of the level of the beasts. We find out that there are better things, and we are fighting our way upwards” (95). And after some initial suspicion, the cure works miracles: it even affects the working girls’ speech—“my girls can talk without angry snapping of the lips, and without the ‘sezi’ and ‘sezee’ and ‘seshee’ of the omnibus” (130)—and their demeanor—“all their faces during the last few months had changed for the better: not one among them all bore the expression which is described by the significant words ‘bold’ and ‘common’” (328–29). Note that it is women who are being remade here. The work of higher culture chooses the female as its object for reconstruction, although the assumption of acculturation, in the minds of Besant and the settlement house advocates, had been that men as well as women would be the objects of change. The choice of women is, in fact, symbolic for Besant, for they represent the essentially “feminized” status of the lower classes in the discourse of culturalism, and underscore the similarity between the position of the lower classes and that of woman in modern consumer society who is both programmed consumer and object of appropriation and consumption. The role played by a woman, Angela Messenger, in the acculturation process does not contradict this reading, for Angela, a student of Newnham College in Cambridge, is introduced to the reader as a new, less “feminized” woman. When her female companion vows never to let love sway her from her idealistic purposes, Angela responds, “Nor will I. . . Marriage spoils a woman’s career. . . .” (4). One of the most difficult balancing acts that Besant faces, in fact, is to keep alive the “feminine” characteristics of Angela and to justify her ultimate retreat from the dominant figure in her relationship with Harry to a more traditionally passive, “womanly” one.
Such a romantic transformation occurs here in the lowest, most exploited forms of production in English capitalism: the sweatshop. Angela has, by her own admission, flouted “every precept of political and social economy” (128). Aspects of her project recall the paternalistic factory settings of the early industrial revolution, although the novel essentially denies the value of the competitive ethos. This is, as we saw in Dickens, a common strategy among English novelists, and as in Dickens the excesses of the capitalist order are laid not at the feet of the rich but of the grubbing commercial figures: the villain of the novel is a real estate speculator who tries to cheat Harry Goslett out of his property. But the significant change in Besant’s 1880s vision is the effort to deny the realities of production. Angela subsidizes the high costs of the “work place” that would price her dresses out of the competition, and in fact there exists no real market for the goods, because they are bought up by Angela herself, in the name of Miss Messenger of the West End. Production has been effectively effaced. The “romance” at this later stage of English capitalism is with consumption.

Although the girls in Angela’s dressmaking shop learn to be happier workers, they are really being taught the joys of the life of the consumer. They develop taste; they appreciate the finer things that work can furnish for them. The “discontent” that Angela instills in them is not so much discontent with working conditions, but with their “mean” and limited aspirations, which will settle for beer and a stroll around the slum streets and worse. When Harry Goslett rouses the Stepney Advanced Club, a group of Whitechapel working men who had been foolishly agitating for radical political action, he tells them politics is useless until you know what you want: “[One] thing that you want is pleasure. Men can’t do without it. Can government give you that? . . . You do not know how to enjoy yourselves. You don’t know what to do. You can’t play music, nor sing, nor paint, nor dance; you can do nothing. You get no pleasure out of life. . . .” (247). It is not so much the promise of affluence, nor the lure of specific goods that Harry and Angela hold out for the lower classes, because they insist that the best things in life are free, like music and art and the enjoyment of beauty. Rather they—and by implication Besant and the like-minded settlement house missionaries—are attempting to reform the lower class individual, giving him and her expanded possibilities for fulfillment, giving them desires—“know what you want. And this is what you want . . .” The hegemonizing operation is going at full tilt, instilling into a new segment of society less the work ethos (although
their higher aspirations will presumably convince them of the value of better work) than the value of proper consumerist desires.\textsuperscript{17}

More than the elision of production is occurring here, however, for Besant is marking a broader shift in England from a production-oriented society to a consumer-oriented one. Lawrence Birkin, in \textit{Consuming Desire}, a study of the relation of this shift to the development of sexology, points out that the driving forces of England’s economy were being transformed, from the 1870s on, from production as the measure of value to consumption. Such a change was being openly theorized by marginalist or neo-classical economists who contended that “value was neither the objective result of social labor nor of social need for products, but was simply attached to objects by the subjective desire of consumers” (Birkin 32). The changeover was manifested in a variety of ways: through a spectacular increase in advertising in both England and the United States, the growth of brand names, the advent of department stores and specialty shops and the notion of “shopping,” the markedly increased circulation of currency (especially among women), and the exploitation of a significant expansion of leisure time and leisure values.\textsuperscript{18} A consumer driven economy, Birkin argues, shifts the locus of influence from the engines of production onto the desires of the buyer.

This, in turn, makes the construction of desire a more critical factor in the management of the economy, and one can see Besant, the settlement workers, and the social work establishment unconsciously shaping that desire at the lower ends of the social scale through their interpellation of a subjectivity that seeks to emulate upper bourgeois tastes, that is “discontented” in Angela Messenger’s words, and yet materially based in family and home. The panoply of operations that we have designated as the “social” prove particularly influential in the latter case, as they strengthen the ideas of home and its material values. In addition, the ethicizing functions of the “social” attempt to control the lower orders in a particularly insidious way, for the working classes and the poor are told to mute their desires through ethical constraints; they are invited to find substitutions for frustrated aspirations toward political and social power—and, need we say, revolution—in the consolations of the consumer products of ordinary material living. The channels for “improvement” are education and orderliness, which will inscribe in them the hegemonic values of the middle class, or products, those surrogates for social values. The “social” thus works hand in hand with the burgeoning consumer state, both of them constructing the carefully limited and unthreatening lower class subject
that we see emerging from the settlement house, social worker, and Besantian schemes.

Jean Baudrillard has argued that consumerism in modern capitalist societies operates as a system of signs that assures middle class domination. Consumption inaugurates a process of discrimination, with products as both the means to discriminate between class strata and to compensate for social class differences. Once an individual is caught up in the sign system, he or she succumbs to its values, which always legitimize the class at the height of power. The aspirations are thus converted into terms of legitimation. As the English middle class begins in the last decades of the century to feel more comfortable about itself—to shed or repress many of those anxieties we observed in the 1840s and 1850s—it establishes legitimacy through its own material insignia (the appurtenances of comfortable living and disposable income), and almost mockingly invites the lower classes to strive for the same. And one of its most effective tools is culture, which by putting an arbitrary value on art, certain leisure activities, and education, those spheres primarily under the control of the upper middle class, introduces the worker into a system of desire that cannot be grounded in usefulness or even exchange value. 19

The definition of culture as “high culture,” that is, the cultivation of the arts, the study of perfection, the devotion to the best thoughts and models of action that Matthew Arnold articulated in Culture and Anarchy (1868), entered the idiom, as Raymond Williams has noted, in the 1860s and 1870s (Williams 80). It informs, clearly, the settlement house movement and Besant’s novel, and it is a particularly useful formulation for controlling the lower classes. Among other things, it incorporates the ethical idealism that one sees in the Oxbridge young men who entered the settlement houses and that grounds Arnold’s thought, and it also lends itself to the development of certain patterns of behavior—life styles, if you will—that emblematize the highest reaches of consumerism. High culture drew the domains of the middle class and the aristocracy closer by exalting an appreciation for the finer things that ranged from the arts through disinterested public responsibility through gracious living among fine houses, sumptuous decor, elegant dress. The material appurtenances of a cultivated existence were not often differentiated in kind from the more properly aesthetic.

In addition, culture both dehistoricizes and historicizes. 20 These antithetical properties are very much in evidence in the role of culture in All Sorts and Conditions of Men. For not only does Angela conceive and put into place a dressmaking operation that civilizes her young
ladies, but she and Harry dream up and erect a Palace of Delights, to be built in the East End slums. Funded through Angela’s largesse, it emerges as an opulent, tapestry-hung, marbled palace, in which, as Harry announces to the gaping crowd, “Here you will have music, dancing, singing, acting, painting, reading, games of skill, games of chance, companionship, cheerfulness, light, warmth, comfort—everything. When these things have been enjoyed for a time they will become a necessity for you, and a part of the education for your young people” (411). But more wonderful still is the fact that Besant’s book inspired an actual Palace of Delight, built by Sir Edmund Currie in 1887 and eventually called the People’s Palace. Besant describes it in his autobiography:

It was built and furnished with a noble hall, a swimming bath, a splendid organ, a complete gymnasium, one of the finest library buildings in London, a winter garden, art schools, and a lecture room. Unfortunately a polytechnic was tacked on to it; the original idea of a place of recreation was mixed up with a place of education . . . We started with all the things mentioned above, and with billiard-rooms, with a girls’ social side, with a debating society, with clubs for all kinds of things—cricket, football, rambles, and the like; we had delightful balls in the great hall, we had concerts and organ recitals, the girls gave dances in their social rooms; there was a literary society . . . nothing could have been better than our start. (244)

Culture, as conceived for the working class, is as many parts recreation as it is art. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, concerted attempts were made to “rationalize” the leisure activities of the lower classes, to head off rowdiness and worse by disciplining play just as work was disciplined. Acculturation of the working class, in the schemes of someone like Besant, was thus a program of mixed high culture and popular culture activities; it concocted something that could be tolerated in the lower orders as a “working class culture,” which incorporated what was recuperable of the old amusements of the lower classes, and added onto them attractions, or distractions, that would draw the worker into the consumption patterns and ideals of their superiors. As part recreation, this culture would keep the working class in an ideologically passive, readily amused, and presumably orderly state.

Unfortunately the People’s Palace did not live up to expectations—or maybe it did. The men, Besant complains, started betting on the bil-
liard games, the literary club proved a failure, and the polytechnic detracted from the pleasurable aspects of the venture. Ultimately, the Draper’s Company took over the day-to-day management of the Palace and neglected the library, closed the winter gardens, and stopped the baths. But no matter; the Palace was symbolic anyway: symbolic of the notion that class difference could be erased by culture, which, because in its now recreational aspects it addresses universal ideals of beauty, the highest forms and the highest ideals, rationality, a “best self,” and a secularized spirituality that transcends narrow creeds, exists outside of historical conflict. The earnest denizens of Whitechapel could leave all class envy and class spite behind them, as they entered a cultural continuum from the lowest to the highest in England.

But the antithesis holds as well: for the very notion of a continuum suggests a process by which the lower classes can become acculturated. The People’s Palace, and the settlement house cultivations, begin the rough working man or woman on his or her ascent toward a higher, finer community. It was understood as a tonic reality that East Enders could not be changed overnight, nor should they aspire to that. It might, in fact, be a matter of generations. For it was through an historical process that they had been stunted in their development, and it would be through an historical process that they would be changed.

The passiveness and enervation of the urban poor in many of the renditions we have of them, the landscapes of deadness, and the mood of defeatism and despair in the accounts, contribute to the impression that this is a natural phenomenon that we are witnessing. Indeed, the arguments for a degenerated urban dweller, atavistic, several stages below the fully developed Englishman, reinforce the naturalization of their condition. We are beyond the passionate awareness of Dickens that something the upper and middle classes have done or neglected to do has created this abysmal mess. For all the “sense of sin” that activates the 1880s, the general view is that urban decay has become a nearly intractable problem because generations of people have grown up, and adapted, in a Darwinian fashion, to its deadened life. The reformation will be a process of changing nature.

Changing nature through culture. Here, too, we sense that we are at something of a conceptual watershed, for implicit in this “nature”/culture opposition lies the conviction that the individual subject can be constructed (or reconstructed) culturally. Daniel Cottam’s excellent analysis of the cultural assumptions governing George Eliot’s fiction delineates the many ways in which cultural construction undergirded
her theories of characterization and social interaction—the foremost and most powerful being education. For, as Cottam notes, the assumption behind educational reform is that one has not reached his full human potential—has not become a full subject—unless he or she educates himself or herself. In many of the horrific accounts of melodramatic degeneration among the poor, we witness the reverse movement: the disintegration of the individual as a result of life of failure and meanness. In Margaret Harkness’s second novel, *Out of Work* (1888), the narrator describes such a case:

The man had a very barren mental history. He was one of the many people crushed out by our present competitive system. He might have been a statesman or a judge if he had been born in more favorable surroundings. . . . His crude, narrow ideas were fast crystallizing. Years had slipped by while he painfully and slowly gathered crumbs of knowledge. His brain was losing its power of gathering from fresh sources, beginning to exercise itself upon the small stores of knowledge stowed away in its cells. Personal experiences had made him bitter. He had only seen one side of life, and he did not believe in what people call ‘happiness’; unless, perhaps the rich enjoyed it. (OW 59)

Even “pleasure” in this account is viewed as a construction. This may account for the conflation of pleasure and cultivation in the program of the People’s Palace. Billiards and concert-going comprise parts of the same constructive intervention. The curative course, in any event, lies within the realm of broad cultural interpellation; it is no longer principally a task of improving the economic conditions of production, or even of reforming or moderating competition, as it had been in Dickens’ time.

The final antithesis in culture is that of materialization and dematerialization. The latter has been, of course, asserted most strenuously, for Matthew Arnold’s call upon his countrymen and women to rise above “doing as one’s ordinary self likes”—field-sports and pleasure activities among the Barbarians or upper class; business, money-making, and indulgence in comfort among the Philistines or middle class; and beer-drinking among the Populace or lower class—beckons them to the qualities of a non-material existence. Catherine Gallagher has brilliantly argued that the Arnoldian discourse of high culture elevates itself above material representation, to a plane on which it constitutes its own determining reality, without attaching itself to a realm of spiritual value, without becoming symbolic. On the other hand, the
spatialization that dominates culture’s representations at least at the level of the urban conditions should warn us that the terms on which it will be formulated (and here, again, it works hand in hand with the rise of consumerism) are material terms. The nexus between the expansion of the consumer society and the high culture movement confirms the relation.

Yet the imagination of the middle class in the 1880s, as we saw in Webb, Harkness, William Booth, and Besant, depicts a world of emptiness and enervation. This is the East End from which certain strata of the lower working classes can be recuperated through Besant’s and the settlement house schemes of cultural uplift. It is vital that these salvageable workers be redeemed, for they must be plucked out of the dangers of contamination from those below them—those who would degrade them into violence and radicalism. The rest, the residuum, classes A (“the lowest class of occasional labourers, loafers, and semi-criminals”) and probably B (“Casual earnings—very poor”) in Charles Booth’s classification, are consigned to desolation.24 They are outside any possible cultural continuum, and they are essentially outside of the power of materialist ethics to refashion their appetites and self-images. The urban poor, or at least a segment of it, has now been exiled from the social strategies of the middle class, but not, as we shall see in the next two chapters, from the middle class imagination or its nightmares.

Finally, implicit in these writers’ construction of a landscape of deadened aspirations complexly connected to their own failures of aspiration, we see operating a newly gendered East End, implicitly configured as passive but receptive. It is one that associates the East End with the failure to differentiate itself, the failure to emerge from its undifferentiated state of deadened aspiration. A more active East End, however, was also the subject of attention from writers at the end of the century, an East End characterized by the virulence of criminal violence or threats to the integrity of the journalistic subject, as we shall see in the next two chapters.