



Lacunae

Social Research in Victorian London

In the beginning, there was darkness. And since the beginning, most has remained darkness still. From the immense gulf between the stars, to the miniscule space between atoms, the vast majority of everything is nothing. Even this page is mostly empty space, the blank white punctuated only sporadically by scatterings of ink. But this darkness, this emptiness, is largely arbitrary, as any architect could tell you. For in architecture, the space is as important as the line, perhaps even more so. Although the line, represented on a blueprint, provides form and structure, it is the space which will be occupied and utilized. Who can say, then, whether the line (matter) defines the space (emptiness) or vice-versa?

But for scholars, explorers, and writers of every sort, darkness, historically, has almost always been invoked as a negative. After the Old Testament's book of *Genesis*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is arguably the most commonly- referenced metaphor of darkness in modern literature.¹ Although Conrad's work offered a critique of colonialism, modern critics have pointed out that there is a persistently negative attitude towards Africa and Africans

¹ *Genesis* 1:1-1:4 "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness."

² Chinua Achebe, *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'* Massachusetts Review 18 (1977)

³ Sir Stanley had been sent to Africa by the New York Herald in order to ascertain the whereabouts of the lost missionary and explorer David Livingstone. Upon encountering Livingstone for the first time in November 1871 near Lake Tanganyika, Stanley uttered the now-famous phrase, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?"

⁴ William Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, (London, 1890), pp. 10-11.

⁵ Booth in John Reeves, *Recollections of a School Attendance Officer* (London, 1915), p. 45

⁶ Thomas Gautrey, "*Lux Mihi Laus*": School Board Memories (London, 1937) p. 35.

Images:

The Parish of Bromley-by-Bow, London, surveyed and printed under the auspices of the London County Council, 1900. Published by P.S. King and Son, London.

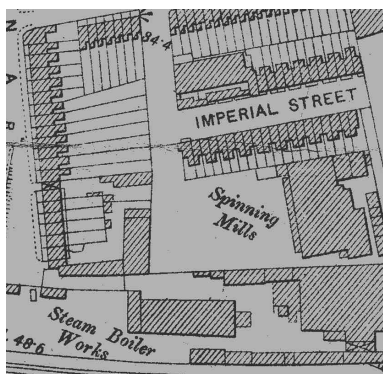
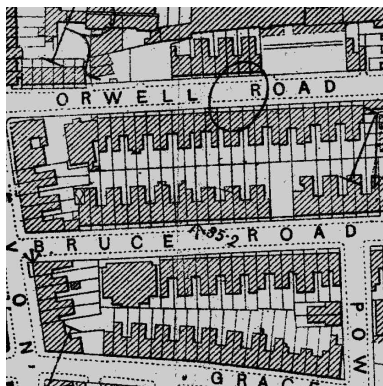
underpinning his writing. Throughout *Heart of Darkness*, the author Chinua Achebe writes, the physical darkness of Africans and the dark, bestial nature of humanity that supposedly lay under the thin veneer of "civilized" society, were conflated.² Those who left the realm of "civilization," defined by European culture and control, Conrad suggests, would inevitably confront "the horror" of darkness both without and within.

Conrad's contemporaries, the social investigators and reformers of Victorian London, deployed similarly negative metaphors of darkness in their own efforts to "improve" the physical, economic, and moral condition of London's slums. They drew explicit parallels between the exploration of "darkest Africa" by Sir Henry Morton Stanley and the reform of what William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, called "Darkest England."³

As there is a darkest Africa is there not also a darkest England? Civilisation [sic], which can breed its own barbarians, does it not also breed its own pygmies? May we not find a parallel at our own doors, and discover within a stone's throw of our cathedrals and palaces similar horrors to those which Stanley has found existing in the great Equatorial forest . . . The two tribes of savages the human baboon and the handsome dwarf, who will not speak lest it impede him in his task, may be accepted as the two varieties who are continually present with us—the vicious, lazy lout, and the toiling slave. They, too, have lost all faith of life being other than it is and has been. As in Africa, it is all trees trees, trees with no other world conceivable; so is it here—it is all vice and poverty and crime. To many the world is all slum.⁴

Through charity, law, and education, Booth and his contemporaries hoped to dispel the darkness and gloom that supposedly permeated the lives of the urban poor. As missionaries and explorers were supposedly bringing the "light" of Christianity and European Civilization to Africa, so too would urban reformers bring the light of their staunch morality and reforming zeal to "Darkest England."

A parallel project was underway in the 1880s and 1890s at the direction of Charles Booth (no relation). C. Booth, a wealthy Victorian whose concern for the poor had been sparked by his involvement in electoral politics, was conducting his own efforts to dispel the "darkness" of the London slums, but through the collection of data rather than the organization of charity. Booth drew on a broad array of sources to compile his study, the likes of which had never been attempted before. In particular, he relied upon extensive interviews



with a diverse host of men and women whose duties or business regularly brought them into contact with London's working-class population. Police, Publicans (tavern owners), public welfare officials ("Poor Law Guardians"), labor union secretaries, and school truant officers (Visitors) were the groups from whom he obtained much of his data. Information collected from the last group, the Visitors, was particularly central to his project. As Booth himself wrote, "no one can go as I have over the descriptions of the inhabitants street after street in this huge district, taken house by house and family by family," he would later claim, "and doubt the genuine character of the information and its truth."¹⁵

Although Booth had great faith in their reliability, these were hardly objective sources. No one that he interviewed would claim to completely understand the life of the London poor, but each claimed authority in one area or another. The truant officers, in particular, were struggling to justify their intrusion into the parenting practices of working-class households. Informing a father or mother that their children's activities were now the prerogative of the state was hardly a message met with welcome arms. The reaction of working-class parents ranged from guarded toleration to passive resistance, to violent refusal. On one storied occasion, a working-class parent dropped a dead cat on the Visitor.⁶ Many *middle-class* Englishmen, whose opinions carried more weight in Victorian public discourse, while recognizing the value of education, also objected to the violation of traditional "liberty" that compulsory education entailed. Met with criticism from middle-class moralists and working-class parents alike, the Visitors were understandably unwilling to weaken their authority by acknowledging that much of the life of their subjects was "dark" to them. Rather than admit the gaps in their knowledge and understanding, however, they claimed both moral superiority and extensive domestic expertise. When called on by Charles Booth to describe the districts in which they worked, although they proved to be a storehouse of detailed knowledge, they were also more than willing to fill in the darkness with their own prejudices and assumptions.

Visitors' assumptions about the causes of crime and poverty led them to describe their subjects with a highly moralized language. This was prominently demonstrated in the Visitors' descriptions of their districts, which were collected by the Charles Booth's assistants in

1886-1887 as part of the research for *Life and Labour of the People of London*. Visitors were obsessed with sorting those they saw as hard-working or at least well-behaved and moral - whom they would describe as "deserving" or "respectable" - from those they felt were lazy, deceitful, or disruptive, the "undeserving."⁷ For the former, the Visitors might lend a sympathetic ear, describe favorably in their reports, or even aid, indirectly, by drawing the case to the attention of charities. The "undeserving," however, would receive only vilification in the Visitors reports and, when appropriate, a recommendation for legal prosecution according to the laws on compulsory school attendance. It is ironic that Charles Booth would use the information provided by the Visitors, men who frequently attributed poverty to moral causes and drunkenness, as evidence that poverty was largely the result of *structural* characteristics of a labor market over which working-class Londoners had no control.⁸

Darkness, in this case, proved far from empty. Quite the contrary, for historians, it is precisely these imaginative spaces where objective knowledge ends and bias or assumption begin, the lacunae, that are often most interesting in our own collection of data. If we wish to get inside the lives and minds of our subjects, there is little more revealing about their character and identities than the ways in which their imaginations fill in these lacunae. How Victorian reformers described "darkest London" is every bit as fascinating to us as the more objective data that they gathered concerning living conditions, employment, education, and crime. From examining the Visitor's descriptions, for example, we learn that, lacking a more objective standard of judgment, they classified working-class parents along relatively stark lines of morality and immorality. Parents' subsequent treatment at the hands of the Visitors, the educational authorities, and the legal system often hinged on how the Visitors filled in the darkness with their moral assumptions about working-class character and behavior.

These imaginative assumptions, moreover, affected how they interpreted the more objectively-observable characteristics of working-class neighborhoods. Visitors could - and often did - ignore or misinterpret behavior that ran counter to their assumptions.

Darkness and ignorance could prove to be every bit as important in guiding their actions as knowledge could, in these circumstances. When children failed to attend school, for example, visitors often

⁷ Behlmer, p. 39. By the mid-1880s, the Visitors were familiar figures in London's working-class neighborhoods and this familiarity allowed them an unprecedented (though not unlimited) level of interaction with parents. It is worth noting that George Sims put together the material for his seminal journalistic expose, *How the Poor Live* (1883), by masquerading as a School Board Visitor. Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, 1992).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹ Jonathan Rose, *Willingly to School: The Working-Class Response to Elementary Education in Britain, 1875-1918*, *Journal of British Studies* 32 (1993): 125



William Booth. Founder of the Salvation Army, 1900.

assumed it was because neither they nor their parents valued education. More recent studies, however, have indicated that many parents did wish to see their children educated, but that the economic necessity and a resentment of state compulsion encouraged them to defy the law. The majority of working-class children, for example, when interviewed later as adults, recalled their school experiences in a positive light.⁹

The parallels between the European exploration and "civilization" of Africa and social reformers exploration and "civilization" of Darkest London are legion. The discovery and organization of data always consists, at least in part, of imposing the investigator's biases and presumptions upon the subjects under examination. But, with more modern eyes, we can see that the "darkness" of London, like Conrad's "darkness" in Africa, was not in any way empty and formless. Rather, it was a living, generative space, whose residents operated according to their own cultural presumptions, were uniquely suited to their particular environment. To assume that, through the collection and organization of data, investigators were shedding light on darkness, was incorrect. Perhaps Africa or the London slums were "dark" to the observers, but those who lived there worked by the light of their own knowledge, and had little need of or desire for the illumination that explorers and reformers claimed to bear.