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Work, poverty and modernity in Mayhew's London

Donna Loftus

At the end of his inquiry into work in late-nineteenth-century London for the second series of *Life and Labour of the People in London*, Charles Booth noted that his extensive interviews and detailed statistics confirmed the impression of life that one gets from a London street corner: of an 'energetic people', most of whom are 'keenly pursuing some aim'. He was uncertain as to whether the fast-paced metropolitan economy that his inquiry revealed, characterised by small business, insecurity, low wages and intense competition, was good or bad or simply inevitable. He asked his readers 'must we learn patiently to endure the evils we cannot cure'.¹ Forty years earlier, Henry Mayhew's investigation of London trades revealed a world of work that pitted workers against each other in a competitive struggle driving down prices and wages. Like Booth, Mayhew was uncertain as to what it all meant. At times he was sure that 'over toil and under pay' would spiral down dragging the wider population of workers into poverty; at other times he expressed hope in a future of enlightened capitalism which put well-managed, interdependent capital and labour at the centre of prosperous and peaceful communities. In this context, Mayhew's revelations of a London manufacturing economy composed of small masters and trading operatives who produced articles for immediate sale, sometimes directly through hawking on the street and sometimes to middlemen, sometimes working alone and sometimes subcontracting, presented what looked like a stubborn barrier to progress. Without factories and with an apparently declining number of artisans, with a work force that was neither capital nor labour, the labour

¹ Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London, Second Series: Industry*, 17 Vols (London: Macmillan and Co., 1904), V, pp. 337-338.

question in London seemed irresolvable. Mayhew resorted to fear-mongering, castigating the small master as a new social evil that needed to be eradicated.

Mayhew's understanding of work in London is not considered a great success by historians. Mayhew is presented as an accomplished realist able to describe in dramatic detail the everyday lives of the working poor but a weak social scientist, too feckless to sustain his analysis and ultimately overwhelmed by the range of material he collected.² Others have argued that his ambivalence to political economy made it difficult for him to develop an understanding of work and poverty that went beyond conventional accounts. He could not move beyond bourgeois norms and, in employing the established categorises of political economy, he was unable to understand the impact of the casual labour market on wages and prices.³ As a result, as John Seed has argued, Mayhew resorted to sentimental accounts, 'crude anthropologies and tired liberal nostrums'.⁴ Though he produced a lively account of London life, one that rivalled Dickens, the reading public would have to wait for Marx and Booth who, in different ways, provided a more scientifically rigorous approach to the labour question.

On the other hand, the undisciplined and dialogic nature of Mayhew's writing reflects his ability to absorb the world around him and reproduce the issues and questions of the day with vividness and urgency. As Karel Williams has argued, it is the 'non-unitary and uncontrolled quality of the discourse in *London Labour and the London Poor* which defines

² David Englander, 'Comparisons and contrasts: Henry Mayhew and Charles Booth as social investigators' in *Retrieved Riches: Social Investigation in Britain 1840-1914*, ed. by David Englander and Rosemary O'Day (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp.105-107.

³ Gareth Stedman Jones, 'The labours of Henry Mayhew, "Metropolitan Correspondent"', *The London Journal*, 10 (1984), 80-85.

⁴ John Seed, "'Free labour=latent pauperism": Marx, Mayhew, and the "reserve army of labour"' in mid-nineteenth-century London', in *The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity in Imperial Britain*, ed. by Simon Gunn and James Vernon (Berkeley: University of California press, 2011) pp.54- 71 (p.68).

the modernity of Mayhew's texts'.⁵ In his attempt to establish an understanding of work, based on 'real life' and taken from the 'lips of the people themselves', Mayhew admitted he was 'speculating'.⁶ Speculation was a good reflection of what Mayhew observed in the London economy where people were trying out a trade or a business, uncertain of the results, with some hope of success but with every expectation of failure. It also reflects the uncertain impact of small masters. Setting up as a small master was a response to poverty affording workers a chance of income and a degree of autonomy, even a hope of social mobility; but small masters also caused poverty by adding labour and goods to an already overstocked market. They destroyed artisan culture by fuelling competition yet they were displaying the ingenuity, energy and initiative esteemed in Victorian liberal culture. It is not because of Mayhew's sentimentality that he was unable to understand work but because he uncovered a world of workers that did not fit with the vision of modernity that the Victorians were producing at that time, which Booth reproduced at the end of the century, and that historians have gone on to accept; one composed of distinct categories of capital and labour in which the workers' desires to be anything other than labour are seen as ill-conceived and irrational and perhaps a threat to social progress.⁷ Looking again at Mayhew's treatment of the small master, Victorian visions of work and modernity can be reconstructed and their impact on subsequent understandings of work better understood.

⁵ Karel Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 237.

⁶ Henry Mayhew, Answers to Correspondents, 29th March 1851, in Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, Volumes I, II and III (London: George Woodfall and Son, 1851). See also Eileen Yeo, 'Mayhew as a social investigator' in *The Unknown Mayhew. Selections from the Morning Chronicle 1849-1850* (London: Merlin, 1971), p.70.

⁷ Donald Reid 'Introduction' in Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights. The Workers Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. By John Drury (London: Verso, 2012), p.xxxiii.

Political economy and the social body

Mayhew's inquiries into the London economy began as part of the *Morning Chronicle* investigations into work and society in the rural, metropolitan, manufacturing and mining districts. As the Christian socialist John Ludlow wrote when reviewing the 'Labour and the Poor' series for *Fraser's Magazine*, the letters from the correspondents to the various districts were intended as an extension of the 'Condition of England' question; they contained no surprises, nothing that had not already been exposed in the parliamentary inquiries and social investigations of the 1830s and 1840s, but they would ensure that 'many grains of truth have been sifted out' which otherwise would have been left buried in the 'dust heaps of parliamentary blue books'. These 'grains of truth' would be exposed to public scrutiny and the 'light-flood of publicity', from which an accurate picture of the causes of poverty and low wages could be drawn, and remedies pursued.⁸ The timing of the inquiries was important. They were seen as an opportunity for honest reflection on two decades of economic change at a moment of pause in social and political unrest following the failure of the Chartist petition in 1848 and the passing of the Ten Hours Act in 1847. Angus Bethune Reach, the *Morning Chronicle* correspondent for the manufacturing districts, summed up the core question: 'What' he asked 'was the impact of the social and economic development of the age on the life of the working man and woman?'

In asking this question, the inquiries were part of a broader debate on the claims of labour and the future of industry in which defenders of political economy such as John Stuart Mill argued that England was in transition towards a modern industrial future in which poverty and low wages would be remedied through social and civic institutions such as banks and

⁸ John Ludlow, 'Labour and the poor', *Fraser's Magazine*, 41 (1850), 1-18 (p.1).

building societies which would help workers help themselves.⁹As Reach stated in his opening letter, political economy had created and would continue to create markets and cheap food, and ‘Now it is for Social Economy to play its part’ by investigating the everyday life of the working population and to inquire if anything could be done to ‘ameliorate their lot’.¹⁰

In the context of these broader debates on the future of work and society, Angus Reach found his investigations fairly easy. He travelled by train into the manufacturing district describing the ‘little Manchesters’ on the way, villages of two or three irregular streets clustered around the mill ‘as in former times cottages were clustered round the castle’. According to Reach, despite the mean and monotonous nature of these communities, they were evidence of progress when contrasted with the ‘miserable and old’ communities of Hand Loom Weavers who resided in ‘filthy and undrained’ parts of manufacturing towns like Ashton-under-Lyne. There were examples of poor conditions in badly-run factories such as the small capitalists of Oldham who pooled together to rent a mill but who had no ‘shield of capital to stand between the humble producer and the immediate fluctuations of the market’. However, examples of good factories, such as the new large capitalists of Aston, who could keep workers employed in downturns, showed the potential of enlightened and well-organized capital to transform communities. It seemed inevitable to Reach that the future lay with the factory system whose ‘ugliness of the surface’ hid the ‘advantages beneath’.¹¹

In contrast, the work of Henry Mayhew, the metropolitan correspondent, was much harder. The manufacturing economy of London was a fast moving maelstrom, difficult to explain and hard to describe. It was a ‘strange incongruous chaos of wealth and want- of ambition and despair’, where there were ‘more homes and more houseless’ and ‘more

⁹ John Stuart Mill, ‘The claims of Labour’, *Edinburgh Review*, 81:164 (1845),498-525.

¹⁰ *Morning Chronicle*, 18 October 1849, p.5.

¹¹ *Morning Chronicle*, 18 October 1849, 8 November 1849, p.5.

feasting and more starvation' than anywhere else on earth.¹² Manufacturing processes had hardly changed since the eighteenth century but artisanal customs and organisations were being undermined and, with them, the learned societies and associations that drew working men together and gave them a presence in the locality. The relationship between production and consumption, prices and wages, capital and labour was obscure. Some workers manufactured articles for sale to shops and warehouse, others for hawking, and earnings depended on unpredictable demands and uncertain competition. Work took place in homes and workshops where hours and conditions were difficult to determine. Mayhew noticed a 'desire for secrecy' on wages and prices, and claimed he had to rely on what snippets of information he could collect along the way, arguing that this made his 'erratic' and 'unsystematic' approach 'a necessary evil'.¹³

The contrast between the metropolitan and manufacturing districts was not lost on readers. Ludlow argued that the manufacturing districts present 'the most pleasing side of industry' when compared to the rural districts and the metropolitan districts. For a start, as Ludlow argued, the large scale nature of industry and the amount of people employed rendered it open to scrutiny. Even if an employer, the 'labour-lord', undertook to 'screw profits out of wages', the operative is not 'lonely and helpless'. Collective responses to unscrupulous employers could be forged and bonds between master and man, man and man, were easy to establish. According to Ludlow, well-organised, large scale factory employment brought superior economic and social benefits: 'all improvements in the condition of the working classes, whether material, intellectual, or moral, can be introduced on the largest scale, and a whole factory may become one living body, animated with one spirit of mutual good-will and zeal'. He repeated Mill's optimistic visions for a future capitalism based on

¹²*Morning Chronicle*, 19 October, 1849, p.5.

¹³*Morning Chronicle*, 27 November 1849, p.5.

partnerships and profit-sharing and argued that industry was still in transition; its full potential in building co-operative communities was still to come. Such a vision cast the London economy in a poor light. Ludlow contrasted the ‘gregarious factory hands’ to the ‘solitary shirt-makers’ and argued that London seemed ‘emphatically the city of unsocialized labour’ characterised by indifference and selfishness in which the fate of the poor is to suffer ‘alone in a crowd’.¹⁴ The London manufacturing economy ran counter to Victorian ideas of modernity that prioritised visibility, public scrutiny and the building of social bonds and civic virtues around commerce and exchange.

The labour question in London was further complicated by understandings of the relationship between the urban environment, economics and society. The *Morning Chronicle* inquiries reflected contemporary assumptions that well-organised capitalism could build a well-organised society. However, at the same time, there was a deep-seated acknowledgment that, to succeed, business forms needed to adapt to their environment. Mayhew became more aware of the tensions as his inquiries developed and as he took up the extended dialogue with political economy in the ‘Answers to Correspondents’ that accompanied the *London Labour and the London Poor*. In one such letter, Mayhew noted Adam Smith’s observation about a little grocer in a small seaport town who could make forty or fifty per cent upon a stock of a single hundred pounds whereas a wholesale merchant in the same place would struggle to make ten per cent on a stock of ten thousand. Mayhew used Smith’s point that ‘narrowness of the market’ in a small town relied on social bonds, familiarity and trust to argue that the entrepreneur needed to adapt to his environment: ‘The man, however, must not only live by his trade, but live by it suitably to the qualifications which it requires’.¹⁵ The problem for Mayhew was that small units of production were more suited to London trades that were

¹⁴ Ludlow, ‘Labour and the poor’, p. 2-3.

¹⁵ Mayhew, *London Labour*, Answers to Correspondents, 26th August, 1851.

characterised by seasonality, unpredictable demand and the limited space available for production. Low levels of mechanisation in the clothing and furniture trades meant that units could be set up in home and workshops with minimal costs. In these small units, the so-called small master could adapt quickly to fashion and changing demand by working longer or by recruiting labour from the ranks of the casual poor or from within his own family. Close links between production and consumption meant articles could be turned round quickly for sale to warehouses, shops or to be hawked in the street. This was an organisation of production that, according to Giorgio Riello, gained ground in the eighteenth century because it was ideally suited to the environment but which, by the mid-nineteenth century, was provoking anxieties because of its association with casual labour, poverty and sweating.¹⁶

The interdependency between economics, environment and social life was recognised by Mill in an essay on civilisation, published in 1836. Like Smith, he noted that a businessman in a small community needed to be honest because he depended on his reputation for trade. However, in the ‘crowded streets of a great city’, the honest businessman would be ten years without a customer. Instead, anonymity and competition for custom required ‘puffing’ and ‘quackery’ because ‘Success, in so crowded a field, depends, not upon what a person is, but upon what he seems’. Competition dragged everyone down, the honest were driven to dishonesty and the intensity of the market encouraged men to take risks and ‘to throw for all or nothing’. This, together with the ‘difficulty of sure calculation in a field of

¹⁶ Giorgio Riello, ‘Strategies and boundaries: Subcontracting and the London trades in the long eighteenth century’ in *Enterprise and Society*, 9.2 (2008), 243-280; Giorgio Riello, ‘Boundless competition: Subcontracting and the London economy in the late nineteenth century’ in *Enterprise and Society*, 13. 3 (2012), 504-532.

commerce so widely extended, renders bankruptcy no longer disgraceful, because no longer an almost certain presumption either of dishonesty or imprudence'.¹⁷

Mayhew's descriptions of London's economy quoted Smith and contained echoes of Mill's essay. He noted how, in London, 'Prices are cut down to the very quick – Capital is lavished, either on advertisements, circulars, or the decoration of premises – gas-lights, plate-glass, and architectural embellishments, are used as snares to catch customers – “tremendous failures,” “selling off,” pretended “fires” and “customhouse seizures.” And a thousand other tricks, are resorted to, merely to push off an extra number of commodities; while the extra number of commodities so pushed off of course necessitates the manufacture of a greater quantity of materials'.¹⁸ The difficulty for Mayhew was in working out if the army of small masters who manufactured articles in this market were honest men adapting commerce to suit their environment, if they were corrupted by it or, if they were dishonest cheats exploiting it for their own advantage; whether, in fact, they were victims or perpetrators. Though he introduced moral categories such as honourable and dishonourable to help classify workers, such distinctions soon broke down. As Mayhew's inquiries progressed and different voices of workers were brought in, his attempts to establish the character of men in such a rapidly changing and highly competitive environment, one in which a degree of puffery was expected, were abandoned.

Despite references to Mill and Smith in his descriptions of London, Mayhew thought that theories of political economy were a chimera further distorting people's understanding of work and poverty. He argued that political economy was the product of imagination, thought up by those who have 'sat beside a snug sea-coal fire and tried to excogitate, or think out the

¹⁷ John Stuart Mill, 'Civilization', *The London and Westminster Review*, 3 (April 1836), 1-28 (pp.14-15).

¹⁸ Mayhew, *London Labour*, 'Answers to Correspondents', 26 April, 1851.

several matters affecting the working classes – even as Adam Smith, the great founder of the science, retired for twelve years to an obscure village in Scotland to dream upon the laws concerned production and the producers’. Despite this, Mayhew argued, it is upon this ‘cobweb philosophy’ that the ‘whole legislation of the present day is made to depend’. Instead Mayhew intended to offer an understanding of the economy based on the experiences of men. As he said, he was the ‘first who has sought to evolve the truths of the labour question by personal investigation’, as opposed to the ‘arm-chair science’ of political economy. Determined to challenge theories of political economy, he became preoccupied in proving the fallacy of supply and demand, widely seen as fundamental principle for determining wages and prices and the primary justification for non-intervention in the organisation of work. Mayhew argued that the fact that the greater demand for cotton workers in the north and cabinet workers in London was not associated with increased wages demonstrated that factors other than supply and demand affected wages.¹⁹ In the cotton industry these other factors included mechanisation which diverted money from the wage fund and forced workers to compete with machines and work at their pace. This did not explain the reduction of wages in the cabinet trades in London which had low levels of mechanisation. Instead, pressure of wages and prices came from an increase in labourers and in the hours and rate of work those labourers undertook. Competition for work was intensified by seasonality and unpredictable demand which swelled a casual labour market already inflated by migrant labour from agricultural districts, Ireland and further afield. Increased competition for work drove prices down and workers had to work harder to produce more for less. As Mayhew discovered, in the case of the mechanised industries, capital could be identified as the rogue element defrauding labour by forcing workers in flesh

¹⁹ Mayhew, *London Labour*, Answers to Correspondents, 29 March 1851; 10th May, 1851.

to compete with workers in iron. The problem with London was that the rogue elements came from within the ranks of labour.

Neither capital nor labour: the problem of the small master

As Mayhew developed his understanding of the London economy in *London Labour and the London Poor*, he focused attention on the behaviour of workers themselves. Mayhew challenged Malthusian arguments that the increase in the labouring population was due to unrestrained sensuality.²⁰ Instead he argued that worker's lack of judgement and restraint in economic matters was to blame. Workers over-stocked the labour market by increasing the numbers of apprentices or by employing their own family to meet orders. According to Mayhew, there were three to four hundred chamber masters in the shoe trade that commonly employed a wife and children. He described the process of work: 'The wife cuts out the work for the binders, the husband does the knife-work, the children sew with uncommon rapidity. The husband, when the work is finished at night goes out with it, through wet and cold, and perhaps hungry – his wife and children waiting his return'. The husband's poverty, his lack of capital and energy in reserve, meant that he had to sell at any price. The husband returned, having walked for hours for little gain and 'thus, women and children labour as well as husbands and father, and, with their combined labours, they only obtain a miserable living'. The 'evil' of family work was the fact it introduced fresh hands to the labour market and decreased the earnings of the whole. It was a vicious circle in which families laboured longer and harder for less.

²⁰ Catherine Gallagher, 'The body versus the social body in the works of Thomas Malthus and Henry Mayhew', *Representations*, 14 (1986) 83-106.

Mayhew identified these working practices in a range of trades and singled out piece-work and homework as the causes of sweating and highlighted the lack of scrutiny and visibility as a problem. For evidence, Mayhew quoted a representative of the clothing trades as saying, ‘I date the decrease in the wages of the workmen from the introduction of piece-work and giving our garments to be made off the premises of the master; for the effect of this was, that the workman making the garment, knowing that the master could not tell whom he got to do his work for him, employed women and children to help him, and paid them little or nothing for their labour.’²¹ The invisibility of work meant it was difficult to see if men were ruthlessly exploiting each other, responding to gluts by taking on apprentices or to moments of hardship by temporarily employing members of their family.

The transformation of workers into employers might begin as a survival strategy, as a response to sudden increased demand, one which allowed the master greater control over earnings during times of hardship, but the result was that it transformed workers into “middlemen”, living by the labour of others’. Rather than promoting upward mobility, this move was, like the descent into prostitution, the start of a downward spiral which dragged others down with it. At its extreme, the sweater or middleman, intent on underselling his neighbours, had to recruit cheaper and cheaper labour. Mayhew noted the ‘importation of foreign labour’ becoming ‘everyday more popular with our enterprising tradesmen’. This too might become a family affair. In the cheap tailoring trades, according to Mayhew, the wives of sweaters made visits to Ireland to find cheap labour.²² As Mayhew made clear, ‘enterprising tradesmen’ were fuelling the casual labour market in an ill-conceived desire to get on. He described the process: ‘To make a profit out of the employment of his brother operatives he must, of course, obtain a lower class and, consequently cheaper labour. Hence it

²¹ Mayhew, *London Labour*, II, p.313; p.315.

²² Mayhew, *London Labour*, II, p.315; p.316.

becomes a business with him to hunt out the lowest grades of working men...Hence drunkards, tramps, men without character or station, apprentices, children – all suit him. Indeed, the more degraded the labourers, the better they answer his purpose, for the cheaper he can get their work, and consequently the more he can make out of it'. As Mayhew's reference to 'brother operatives' made clear, he thought labourers who became employers betrayed their nature and their class because, 'Whether he goes by the name of "sweater", "chamber-master" "lumper" or contractor, it is this trading operative who is the great means of reducing the wages of his fellow working man.'²³ The trading operative was worse than the capitalist because his lack of reserves, his lack of capital, meant he could not hold out for better prices. His poverty and that of his fellow trading operatives meant that he had to push the price of labour lower to gain an advantage. Such workers had subverted their nature enriching themselves at the expense of those they should be uniting with.

Mayhew presented the small master as dishonest, destructive and selfish but he also recognised that he was both victim and perpetrator of the highly competitive economic environment. Mayhew thought that the trading operative destroyed the brotherly sentiments that ought to exist amongst working men, but he also demonstrated some sympathy with their plight noting that 'it is when workmen find the difficulty of living by their labour increased that they take to scheming and trading upon the labour of their fellows'.²⁴ If he did not exploit others, the small master might exploit himself by working long hours to produce more in the honest but misguided hope of increasing his earnings. Other trading operatives might 'scamp' or cheat to gain advantage over fellow operatives, retailers and consumers, employing cheap or damaged materials and using tricks to hide faults. Drawing on evidence from workers, Mayhew argued that a 'good workman' would make a four-foot mahogany chest of drawers

²³ Mayhew, *London Labour*, II, p.329.

²⁴ Mayhew, *London Labour*, II, p.330.

in five days working regular hours for a piece-work rate of 35s. The ‘scamper’ would make five chests of inferior quality in the week and carry them for sale to the slaughters, retailers who bought as cheaply as possible, and sold for as high a price as they could. Mayhew quoted a worker who claimed that scamped goods ‘would hold together for a time and that was all; but the slaughterer cared only to have them viewly and cheap’.²⁵ Mayhew also found evidence of slaughters cheating workers that inclined him to sympathise with the small master. He reported on the ‘pale looking men’ who could be seen on the streets of Tottenham Court Road on a Saturday afternoon, ‘bending under the weight of a cheffonia or chest of drawers that they have ‘made up’ (for no skill was involved)’. He noted how the slaughter men would use any means to screw down the price, relishing a rainy Saturday so that they could use the damage done to the appearance of furniture by the rain to drive down price, knowing that the small master would be reluctant to carry on to the next slaughter in the rain.²⁶ Whether wilfully defrauding others, or being defrauded, the only causal factor Mayhew could identify was the small master’s lack of financial and physical reserves. He was neither capital nor labour and had not the financial protection of the former or the social support of the latter.

The demonization of the small master was used by Mayhew to express anxieties about the London artisan. As is well documented, the distinction between the artisan, the journeyman and the small master was blurred in practice. However, the term artisan assumes shared the concepts of trust and craft that were cultivated by trade societies and organisations.²⁷ Mayhew’s inquiries repeatedly sought to demonstrate that the working practices of the small master were destroying the communities and trade customs that helped

²⁵ Mayhew, *London Labour*, II, p.303. [viewly is right]

²⁶ Mayhew, *London Labour*, II, p.333.

²⁷ Iorwerth Prothero, *Radical Artisans in England and France, 1830-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

regulate output, prices and wages.²⁸ His stories of poverty-stricken silk weavers in Spitalfields fuelled fears that a golden age of artisanal production was in decline, taking with it centres of learning and culture such as the Entomological Society. Mayhew was clear that small masters compared unfavourably to the London artisan who forged societies and associations to protect and promote the trade and to support workers in periods of unemployment. Mayhew argued that cabinet-makers could be divided into society and non-society men, the former numbering between six and seven hundred, the latter between four and five thousand. The contrast between the two types of worker was deliberately striking. Mayhew recounted a visit to a meeting of the Wood-carvers' Society in Tottenham Court Road at which forty or fifty society men were present discussing trade concerns. Mayhew described the books on art and architecture that surrounded the men as aids to self-improvement that would help their craft and, with it, help develop the trade. For Mayhew the manner and appearance of the members was evidence of the 'refining character of their craft' which he stated was a 'relief from the scenes of squalor, misery, dirt, vice, ignorance and discontent, with which these inquiries too frequently bring one into connection'. By contrast, the non-society men gained whatever work they could, and cheated and scamped to gain advantage and showed little interest in future education, social support or improvement. The distinction between men that belonged to societies and those that did not was that 'the one maintain their own poor, the others are left to the mercy of the parish'.²⁹ Thus, the small master exploited himself, his family and his fellow workers and abandoned his fellow workers to the parish. He represented a form of work that was detrimental to society.

²⁸David Green, *From Artisans to Paupers: Economic Change and Poverty in London, 1790-1870* (Scholar: 1995); Hilda Kean and Bruce Wheeler, 'Making history in Bethnal green: Different stories of nineteenth-century silk weavers', *History Workshop Journal*, 24.1 (2003), 217-230.

²⁹ Mayhew, *London Labour*, II, p.311 and III, pp. 221-231.

Mayhew characterised small masters as destroying society and pitting man against man. Despite this, the evidence he collected showed that setting up as a small master required a degree of co-operation to ensure the relevant training and experience was acquired. Mayhew described the process of ‘setting up’ in the cabinet trade. Many started by taking a room and constructing a rude bench out of old material for around 2s. If they could not take a room, they might hire a bench alongside other garret masters; in some cases there would be two or three men in one room. On other occasions the prospective master assisted another garret master and together they might take two bedsteads instead of one to the slaughter house and divide the earnings. Tools were collected by degrees, bought second hand and sharpened at a ‘friendly workman’s where he can meet with the loan of a grindstone’. New handles were put on with pieces of waste wood. Once they had acquired tools and a bench, the men bought whatever material they could afford and set to work. The process could take a while and, according to Mayhew, ‘many men, to start themselves, as it is called, have endured, I am informed, something like starvation most patiently.’ Others were luckier: in some cases, friends might advance 40s to 50s to begin with, and then the man must ‘shift for himself.’³⁰

As Mayhew’s description showed, far from pitting man against man, setting up drew on existing social networks and may have helped establish others; it required favours and necessitated a degree of self-sacrifice and co-operation between working men. Setting up may have destroyed some customs but it replicated others. In the *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith described how workmen ‘liberally paid by the piece, are very apt to over-work themselves, and to ruin their health and constitution in a few years. A carpenter in London,

³⁰ Mayhew, *London Labour*, III, pp.221-231.

and in some other places, is not supposed to last in his utmost vigour above eight years.³¹

The context was of course different. In the over-stocked labour market that Mayhew described, one that lacked the structure of artisanal regulation, this way of working destroyed more than the health of an individual worker. Nevertheless, small masters were mobilising customs, networks and practices in a new environment.

Mayhew argued that small masters were driven by the selfish desire for advantage to exploit themselves, their family and brother operatives. Nevertheless, the evidence he collected acknowledged more complex understandings. When Mayhew compared the trading operative to his agricultural counterpart, the peasant proprietor, he implicitly acknowledged that the working man's desire for autonomy and control over everyday life in an environment of intense insecurity may motivate him to set up as a small master. Mayhew agreed that there was much to commend the ideal of proprietorship, and he concurred that the principle of working for oneself increased the productiveness of labour. However, he argued that there were distinctions to be made between the small master and the peasant proprietor. The peasant proprietor worked for his personal sustenance and comfort: the more he worked the more food he obtained. In contrast, the small master had to make goods, carry them to market and exchange them for money or articles for his sustenance and comfort. The nature and process of this exchange in a competitive market meant the small master worked at a disadvantage; the more he and his associates worked, the less they earned. Hard work was no release as in 'over-toil', the small master lowered the market 'against himself'.³² If not vicious and selfish, then the small master was deluded and irrational. His only redemption

³¹ Adam Smith, *An inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nation*, (London: Everyman's Library, [1776] 1991), p.73.

³² Mayhew, *London Labour*, III, pp. 221-231.

was to realise his true state as ‘labour’ and build institutions and organisations that would help establish fair competition.

Mayhew’s observations, despite their circularity and repetitiveness, did make some breakthroughs on the labour question. He anticipated Jevon’s denunciation of wage fund thinking by challenging the principle of supply and demand and through his observations of the various ways that social and cultural factors, even cheating and scamping, could impact on prices and wages. In arguing that the lack of financial reserves put the small master at a disadvantage, Mayhew anticipated Marx. He demonstrated how the distribution of wealth perpetuated inequalities when he said that ‘The advantages that the large master derives from the extent of his capital, the small master can only seek to counterbalance by the use of inferior materials and workmanship’. However, Mayhew’s commitment to distinctions between capital and labour meant that he blamed small masters and their poor economic decision making for their plight. He argued that the capitalist and labourer were two distinct individuals, ‘And the union of the two in any one person is generally a great evil’. In an answer to one of many inquiries asking if readers could help ameliorate the plight of ‘sempresses and milliners’ by directly employing them rather than going to the shop for articles, Mayhew was clear: by converting workpeople into ‘petty-traders seeking and obtaining employment of their own account’, such action would only encourage the ‘evils of the small master system’ and represent a reversion to ‘primitive economic principles’.³³ Instead Mayhew repeated what was becoming a new orthodoxy in the 1850s by arguing, along with the Christian Socialists and John Stuart Mill, that capitalism could be made fairer through schemes of partnership and co-operation.³⁴ For Mayhew, this enabled men with no

³³ Mayhew, *London Labour*, Answers to Correspondents, 16 June, 1851.

³⁴ Bertrand Taithe, *The Essential Mayhew: Representing and Communicating the Poor* (London: Rivers Oram, 1996), pp.39-42.

reserves to compete. He claimed, ‘The only mode in which the combination of the functions of capital and labour can be carried out so as to be able to compete with the large employers is by association; that is to say, by the aggregation of a number of small capitals possessed by working-men into one large “joint-stock,” so as to produce a sufficiently extensive capital to compete with the large masters’.³⁵The trading operative was primitive, the future was with larger forms of business organised in co-operative partnerships and joint stock companies; a system that retained the distinctions between capital and labour in production.

Small masters were still a problem when Charles Booth undertook the inquiries into work in London that were published as the Industry Series in the 1890s. By then, the co-operative revolution had not happened, nor was it expected. As such, Booth wondered what was to be done. Booth described how small masters in the highly competitive trades, such as the garment and cabinet making, produced goods to no specific demand which were then hawked around the streets of London. The result was the same pattern of over- work, over-production and under consumption that Mayhew had identified. Booth questioned small masters on why they set up to work on their own account when there was so little prospect of making a profit. The answers echoed the voices of small masters and trading operatives that appeared in Mayhew’s inquiry. Small masters talked of independence rather than profit and the control that came with working for oneself. They talked of the flexibility that came with employing wives and children that allowed them to adapt to changing demand and keep money within the family.³⁶ There was no doubt that such behaviour caused low wages and poverty but, as Booth and his researchers acknowledged, it was also the only way men could even hope to escape a future of relentless labour. The contradictions that Mayhew identified

³⁵Mayhew, *London Labour*, Answers to Correspondents, 16 June, 1851.

³⁶ Donna Loftus, ‘Investigating Work in late nineteenth century London’, in *History Workshop Journal*, 71 (2011), 173-193.

were still apparent. As the political economist McCulloch noted, sub-contracting and setting up caused poverty but it was the only way that working men could hope to break out of the ranks of labour.³⁷

Conclusion

Mayhew's understanding of wages and political economy was incremental. As his 'Answers to Correspondents' demonstrates, he was forced to develop his thinking on work, wages and political economy in response to questions and critiques. As such, his inquiries were erratic. He did not develop a new political economy that might explain work in London, nor did he adequately explain how it operated in practice. Mayhew was no original thinker but he absorbed the world around him and reproduced it in accounts of the London manufacturing economy. *London Labour and the London Poor* is a merger of half-thoughts, observations, reactions and instincts, full of contradictions, circular arguments and dead-ends. As such, his inquiries are a good reflection of the London economy, characterised by fleeting exchange, opportunism, custom and negotiation fuelled by the hope of better things in the future. As he wrote, Mayhew exposed the contradictions of work in Victorian London, an organisation of production that produced masses of goods for workers who could not afford them, 'Too many shirts and too many shirtless'. He described a crisis of capitalism in which people were compelled to make a living in an environment where work did not pay. He described a social crisis in which the honest or honourable workers had no way of distinguishing themselves from the dishonest or of breaking out of the ranks of labour. Small masters became the focus because they embodied the contradictions at work. They were not villains or victims. They

³⁷ David Schloss, *Methods of Industrial Remuneration*, Third edn. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1898), p.181.

worked against each other and with each other. They were modern workers adapted to their environment but they were also archaic figures, employing modes of working that had not changed for years. Their existence was precarious but they were stubbornly persistent; they were still present when Booth conducted his inquiries at the end of the century. If Mayhew and Booth were unsure what to do with them, so too are historians. Not artisans or factory workers, radical or conservative, they did not wait for revolution or reform but got by in the only way they could.