

Respectability
and the London
Poor, 1780–1870

Lynn MacKay



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RESPECTABILITY AND THE LONDON POOR,
1780–1870: THE VALUE OF VIRTUE

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1780–1870: THE VALUE OF VIRTUE

BY

Lynn MacKay



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INTRODUCTION

Historians are agreed that in the last two hundred years there has been a transformation in social relations: in the late eighteenth century, life was lived largely in public outside the home, and this was especially the case in plebeian neighbourhoods in cities. Neighbours depended upon one another in the struggle to make ends meet, lending, borrowing and sometimes simply giving and receiving assistance; subsistence was a collective endeavour. Reputation in the neighbourhood was crucial, and neighbours judged one another constantly; being thought respectable was the key to various kinds of assistance. The focus was generally very short-term; the ability to get through the next week was often the crucial concern. Finally, there was a greater tolerance of violence, both interpersonal and against animals. Since the eighteenth century, home has become a sanctuary and a main locus of leisure time. Families no longer regularly rely on neighbours in trying to maintain subsistence: men and women are meant to make ends meet through their own good efforts. Respectability has been redefined and no longer rests primarily on the judgement of neighbours. The focus has become much more long-term, and violence is thought shameful and is frequently hidden, especially if it occurs within the family. As well as the widespread agreement that such shifts have occurred, there has also been consensus that in the nineteenth century the middle and upper classes promoted such shifts, especially for plebeian women and men, and that demands for the adoption of new codes of behaviour and habits of mind were couched in moral terms. It was thought necessary, in short, for plebeian men and women to undergo a moral reformation.

There has been much less agreement concerning the timing of such shifts, however. Robert Shoemaker, one of the most trenchant, and certainly one of the most prolific historians focusing on these changes, has argued in a series of articles and in his book, *The London Mob*,¹ that by the end of the eighteenth century there had been significant changes in plebeian behaviour. He says street disputes, both physical and verbal, lessened over the course of the eighteenth century, and the importance of reputation diminished. Shoemaker links these shifts to new notions of masculinity and femininity that downplayed violence for the former and encouraged passivity for the latter; to the growth of politeness – especially

significant for the middle and upper classes; and to an increasing desire for privacy that lessened the significance of the streets for sociability. Most of all, however, Shoemaker posits the changing relationship between the individual and the community as the crucial factor in lessening interpersonal conflict and violence. He says that for all but the very poorest,

What one said or did in public, or what others said about you, became less important than what happened behind closed doors, or indeed one's own individual self-examination. Increasingly, the individual was able to shape his or her own reputation without reference to the wider public ...

A more modern notion of the individual developed ... in which identity was determined by the inner, 'true' self, regardless of public opinion.²

Shoemaker concludes that as distinctions between the public and private spheres became more rigid, reputation less important and the neighbourhood ability to police it less efficacious, the street crowd 'lost its central place in London public life', so that 'By the end of the eighteenth century the age of the mob was over'.³ Underlying these shifts was urban growth, which, according to Shoemaker, 'radically altered patterns of public social interaction in eighteenth-century London. Owing to the rapid pace of population growth, economic change and social mobility, a new kind of urban environment was created in which relationships formed in neighbourhoods and on the streets became less important than those forged in less public contexts'.⁴

In concentrating on various kinds of street activities occurring throughout the century, Shoemaker brings his readers close to the tenor of plebeian life.⁵ He also insists, quite rightly, that plebeian Londoners were not mere passive recipients of new cultural notions and values trickling down from on high.⁶ That said, however, there are some fundamental problems with the trajectory he describes. First, for all he insists that all classes contributed to shaping the cultural shifts he identifies, it is often not clear in the book which class Shoemaker is discussing – generic Londoners appear regularly. Nor, as Nick Rogers has noted, does Shoemaker adequately explain the plebeian agency he posits. As Rogers points out, 'Gestures toward the decline of neighbourhood and its consequent effect upon public reputations remain gestures. To make the case a richer social geography of London is required'.⁷ Finally, the evidence does not seem to bear out claims that these shifts had taken place for most plebeian people by the end of the eighteenth century.

John Carter Wood has studied particular aspects of these shifts, and the timeframe he posits differs from Shoemaker's. Focusing especially on plebeian violence in nineteenth-century England, Carter Wood charts the ways in which two dominant mentalities of violence interacted through the century: what he terms the 'civilizing' (language idealizing 'rationality and self-restraint') and the

'customary' ('Originating in an older social context, legitimating direct physical confrontation, appealing to less restrained notions of propriety'⁸). According to Carter Wood these mentalities became identified respectively with the middle and working classes, although by the 1870s, he says, all but the roughest sections of the working class had 'adopted various elements of Victorian respectability',⁹ resulting in a wide penetration of the 'civilising' ethos, as Jon Lawrence put it in his review of the book.¹⁰ Lawrence criticizes Carter Wood for being overly schematic, particularly in overemphasizing the hegemony of the civilizing mentality in the middle class. For all its sensitivity to customary culture and the importance of spatiality, Carter Wood's book inadequately explores the ambivalences, adaptations and instances of resistance in various sectors of plebeian London to what been called the middle-class civilizing mission.¹¹ One of his most important influences is the work of Norbert Elias,¹² whose notion that social change begins at the top of society and then trickles out and down through subordinate ranks seems to deny agency to the majority and does not adequately recognize that adoption, co-option, adaptation or rejection of new codes of behaviour may result at least in part from factors internal to subordinate classes. In Elias's version of change, when the majority does reject elite discourses, it seemingly becomes little more than a retrograde force blocking the path to civilization. This diminishes the humanity of the majority and runs counter to the whole impetus of social history in the past four or five decades. For all these reasons, then, Elias's analysis seems rather a poisoned chalice for historians, in spite of the nuanced attempts by people like Carter Wood to use it.¹³

A third period on offer for the transition from customary codes of behaviour is the decade of the 1930s. During this ten-year span more than a million families moved from inner-city neighbourhoods to the glory of home ownership in the suburbs. A recent BBC Four documentary, relying on the work of Martin Pugh and Richard Overby among others, echoed the claims historians have made for the late eighteenth century and the 1870s: in the 1930s 'Daily life became centred on the home and family rather than on the street and the extended community'.¹⁴ Indeed, salient features of the customary neighbourhood were still to be found in some 1950s neighbourhoods – Willmott and Young's examination of Bethnal Green being the best-known study of these – and Philip Abrams's work on even later decades still found in places a 'densely woven world of kin, neighbours, friends and co-workers, highly localised and strongly caring within the confines of quite tightly defined relationships'.¹⁵

Clearly there is no consensus concerning the timing of this shift that in the long run all agree took place. This study argues that in many sectors of plebeian London, customary forms of thought and behaviour persisted far longer than often supposed; that neighbourhood reputation upon which respectability rested remained crucial; that collective resources for maintaining subsistence

remained popular and necessary; that a short-term focus remained the norm; and that violence remained accepted. There was, in fact, no single date at which a transformation in social relations can be said to have occurred for plebeian London as a whole. At different times, different sectors adopted, adapted, resisted, manipulated or rejected various strands of the new discourse extolling privacy and individual responsibility. In order to make sense of this very complex situation, a systematic framework of analysis is helpful, since it is in the nature of cultural transformations to be complicated. While making no claim to chart the transition being examined to its fruition, this study hopefully will help establish a more systematic approach to understanding such change.

To this end, four factors have been identified that helped customary culture remain resilient: spatiality, economic uncertainty, the extent and nature of the social safety net, and finally, the lack of mobility. The importance of spatiality has, until recent years, perhaps been under-appreciated by historians. As Edward Soja has noted, geography became marginalized in critical social thought in the nineteenth century, and space came to be seen 'as dead, fixed, undialectical, immobile, while time was seen to be filled with richness, fecundity, life, dialectic'. Throughout his work, Soja has opposed 'space blinkering historicism',¹⁶ as he calls it, but he also notes that while space helps shape social beings, people also make and remake physical spaces.¹⁷ The spatial configuration of neighbourhoods – the type of housing and its arrangement along streets, courts, yards and alleys – was crucial in promoting or discouraging the kind of private, self-sufficient family life being touted by middle- and upper-class reformers in the nineteenth century. As will be seen, the spatiality of plebeian neighbourhoods in central London was not conducive to the new demands. When economic uncertainty is widespread, especially when resulting from fairly long-term patterns and structures of employment, people frequently hesitate to embrace discourses that may well make subsistence more difficult to maintain, or which cannot deliver on what they promise. As David Green has shown, economic security in many of the trades found in the central part of the capital was decreasing during this period, making cultural experimentation yet more risky for many plebeian Londoners.¹⁸ The chief instrument of state social assistance at this time was the poor law. During the nineteenth century, both this system and philanthropy were reformulated to reflect and achieve priorities and values the middle and upper classes thought necessary. Both changed in ways that limited their usefulness to plebeian Londoners. As Martin Bulmer has observed, 'Self-help networks at the local level were a realistic response to low incomes, economic adversity and unpredictable domestic crisis. In the absence of state support for the relief in the home of illness, old age or unemployment, the "safety net" for most families was the neighbourhood itself'.¹⁹

The final factor, lack of mobility, resulted from the absence of widely accessible cheap public transportation before the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Even with its establishment, however, plebeian women and men were still often tied to the neighbourhoods of central London. Men had to be able to work on very short notice when a job turned up; women needed to be able to access credit at shops where they were known. As George Sims said of the central London poor in 1883, 'There are thousands of these families who would go away into the suburbs, where we want to get them, if only the difficulty of travelling expenses to and fro could be conquered. They herd together all in closely packed quarters because they must be where they can get to the dock, the yard, the wharf, and the warehouses without expense.'²⁰ Acting together, these factors combined to help the web of customary cultural responses remain resilient and plausible for many plebeian Londoners between 1780 and 1870. Given that the last of these factors – cheap public transportation – in the time period of this study is important through its absence, the focus of examination will be on the first three. Identifying factors that permitted customary cultural practices to retain their appeal does not mean they wholly determined such preferences. Rather, such factors should be seen as creating conditions of plausibility: helping to convince people that particular behaviours and priorities – particular discourses – offered practical help and the greatest chance of success in the business of maintaining life.

Saying that different sectors of plebeian London dealt with the new notions of social relations at different times is not to deny the existence of class. Rather, neighbourliness of the sort that will be discussed in this study played a crucial role in the development of class, although admittedly, it was not a necessary and sufficient condition automatically producing class solidarities. The argument of this book builds on the work of Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, and David Green. As Lis and Soly acknowledge, neighbourliness, and the street life in which it was embedded, could provide 'mutual support and consolidation' that might diffuse the potential for class conflict, encouraging people to endure conditions better resisted. Moreover, given that plebeian London was composed of innumerable strata often shading one into another, whose occupants assiduously defended their status, neighbourliness could easily lead to intra-class conflict and dissension. Nevertheless, Lis and Soly also point out that 'the vitality and conviviality of much working-class street life could cement a sense of shared identity and common interests among the ... class', and this in turn had the potential to promote class solidarity. Thus, neighbourliness could be a crucial enabling factor: as Lis and Soly note, 'Cultural practices like gossip, blame, public ridicule and street demonstrations remained focused on preventing forms of internal differentiations that could harm solidarity.'²¹ Neighbourliness also made it possible to raise street crowds quickly in order to address a variety of grievances – actions that cannot simply be dismissed as pre-political mob fury, as Edward Thompson

and a host of followers have shown. Rather, in environments in which alternative forms of action were difficult and limited, crowd tactics, as James C. Scott has insisted, did not reflect popular incapacity for more ‘advanced’ forms of action, but were the result of conscious, realistic assessments of political constraints.²² Neighbourliness also played a role in more formal responses to authorities and employers. Whether or not it is seen as a kind of precursor to mature class consciousness does not negate the role of neighbourliness as a continuous enabling factor. Among male artisans, the most politicized sector of the working class, solidarity to be sure centred on the workplace, but as Green has shown, it also ‘meshed imperceptibly with working-class residential communities. The pub, house of call, friendly society and trade unions were primarily local institutions that reinforced the close spatial links between workplace and home.’²³ For casual workers, propinquity was also crucial. These workers had to be known by employers and to be close at hand to take up any work opportunities that arose. Consequently, while they moved often, these people rarely moved out of a neighbourhood. As Green has noted, ‘structures of information and assistance were highly localized and reinforced the role of the neighbourhood in working-class life’ so that ‘the working-class community overlapped closely with that of the workplace.’²⁴ Green concludes that propinquity

provided a local setting for the construction of dense, social networks in which neighbours and fellow-workers were one and the same. Those who offended against the trade, by refusing to join the union, for example, or acting as a blackleg, ran the risk of alienating both workmates and neighbours alike.

This pattern of residential propinquity had much to do with the solidarity of working-class communities, and specifically with the close associational life of artisans.²⁵

A multiplicity of identities within plebeian London was available as people defined themselves and their status against one another. Nevertheless, a number of features of the discourse on customary popular culture were shared by various plebeian aggregates, and there was at times an awareness of common interests – or at least an identification of common enemies – that could transcend particular plebeian collectivities. Class, in short, was a Janus-faced concept, in one direction facing outward, calibrating relations with other classes, and in the process helping continuously to shape and reshape a shared plebeian identity based on neighbourhood and work solidarities. Facing the other direction, inward within labouring communities, class was a finely graduated hierarchy that could lead to roiling discontent and acrimony between and among plebeian people. The notion that class does not possess a unitary definition borrows from the insights of David Cannadine, but rejects his insistence on the greater valency of the hierarchic: that is, the social world of Britain as a whole encompassing ‘a

carefully graded ordering of rank and dignity, in which each layer melded and merged almost imperceptibly into the next, being 'a seamless web'.²⁶ This kind of privileging seems necessarily to eviscerate class as a meaningful analytic concept. Rather, in understanding class it is necessary to attempt to maintain a Janiform counterpoise, in this case to see plebeian Londoners as copemates in both its contronymic meanings: at once as partners and as antagonists.

In positing this understanding it is necessary to consider the relationship between language and class. Certainly, in the wake of the linguistic turn the importance of language has to be acknowledged, but this does not mean that it wholly produces class. The moral reform discourse was available throughout the nineteenth century, but for much of the period it met with dogged resistance, or at best provisional and temporary acquiescence from a number of plebeian collectivities. Not until structural factors like the labour market, the spatial arrangements of housing and neighbourhoods, a more useful social safety net and cheap public transit had been reconfigured did the discourses of moral individualism gain currency. As Eley and Nield observed,

Poststructuralism has been at its most productive when forcing us to confront the complex machineries of meaning through which poverty comes to be understood, all the complex modalities of its social and cultural construction ... That we now need to approach poverty as a discursive formation is for us beyond dispute. However, that does not exhaust all the registers of possible or necessary approach.

For example, can the poststructuralist register deal sufficiently with the question of how people enter the condition of being poor, with the processes that produce and reproduce poverty as well as those that discursively secure such a condition of being? ...

Discourse may provide the limits of our ability to talk about things, but discursive constructions cannot exhaust the world's field of precultural or noncultural settings and actualities.²⁷

This study explores the plausibilities structured by language, but also those emanating from non-cultural settings, insisting on the retention of 'the more structuralist register of analysis' that characterized social history.²⁸

Before turning to the focus and context of this study, it is necessary to explicate several central terms: 'respectability', 'resistance' and 'the poor'. Respectability is a slippery notion and has been interpreted variously by historians. It has not often been seen, however, as a plebeian resource to be deployed against the upper classes – as a weapon of the weak, to use Scott's evocative phrase. Certainly, in trying to explain why plebeian men and women chose to adopt a respectable way of life, a number of historians have focused on its relationship to class and status, asking whether it promoted or weakened class solidarity. Both Geoffrey Best and F. M. L. Thompson, for instance, insisted that notions of respectability cut across class boundaries, promoting greater consensus in nineteenth-century