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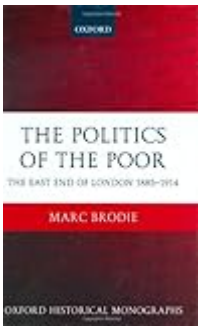

Marc Brodie. *The Politics of the Poor: The East End of London 1885-1914.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004. viii + 240 pp. $95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-927055-2.

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This is a more important work than its resolutely local approach and analysis would suggest. In form it is a painstaking and detailed microhistory of the politics of eleven East End constituencies in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. In substance, however, it is an extended critique of the dominant interpretation of working-class political culture of recent decades, and of the historiography of representation that produced it. As such, *Politics of the Poor* is implicitly a challenge to turn back towards meticulous archival scholarship, towards the study of local social and economic structures and towards quantitative as well as linguistic analysis in order to uncover the dynamics of attitudinal change.

The larger implications of the work arise in part because the area under study is not your average locality, but the East End of London, haunt of Beatrice Potter and Jack the Ripper, Charles Booth and General Booth. A century later it has been the stalking ground of historians who have focused upon the ways in which forms of life and community are mediated and understood through discourse. For many at the time and since, this stretch of London, and especially its Thameside section, has provided the archetypical model of a Victorian urban dystopia, marked by poverty, crime, and casualization, as well as the contested site of its description, explanation, and remedy. Its culture in the period before the Great War has been read, most famously by Gareth Stedman Jones, as increasingly inward-looking and defensive, unable to construct or sustain progressive organizations, spasmodically violent, and insofar as it was expressed in national or local elections, increasingly open to populist Conservative appeals to empire and against aliens.[1] Brodie sets out to show that most of these archetypes are stereotypes, and argues that our reading of both the social and economic structure of the East End, and its political culture, needs to be revised and often reversed.

First of all, the East End was, he shows, far more heterogeneous and generally far more prosperous than the explorers of Darkest England let on. Beyond the obviously more prosperous areas towards Hackney, even the poorest localities had a substantial sprinkling of the better off: professionals, shopkeepers, and more stable and secure artisans or laborers. Nor was the nature of East End employment uniformly degraded, since even in the docks, (the classic site of casualization) a significant proportion of the workforce was in more or less permanent employment. This was even truer of the often-ignored wharf workers who made up a large part of the riverside workforce. Similar characteristics could be found in other industries in the area, so that the majority of East End workers were in fairly steady employment.

If East End poverty has been exaggerated, so too

has its conservatism. The argument of Stedman Jones rested in any case on inner constituencies which showed a conservative dominance in the period (though never a monopoly). The seven constituencies which surrounded this inner core, however, had either a far more varied political history or, as in the case of Poplar and Whitechapel, were solidly liberal throughout the period. Moreover, Tory successes rested most often on an ability to get out a limited but very stable vote, whereas the liberal problem was to mobilize an innately "progressive" electorate which all too often abstained. Most important is Brodie's analysis of the sources of conservative support: contrary to the picture of a populist Toryism, resentful of do-gooders and resting on a base of unstable and casualized labor, he argues that conservative strength drew upon the more prosperous, stable, "respectable" and church-going sections of the working class–those most likely to possess the vote and most likely to use it. Indeed an important element of this work is to flesh out in substantial detail who exactly the electorate was in the period between the Third Reform Act and World War One. In doing so, Brodie sheds an interesting light on the long debate about this electorate. His detailed cross-referencing of electoral registers and census returns supports the conclusion of his supervisor, John Davis, that the electorate broadly followed social and occupational lines, thus undercutting the class-based "franchise factor" argument for this period put forward by Ross McKibbin.[2] Yet at the same time Brodie makes clear, *contra* Davis, that the franchise was hardly "random and vexatious"; among each occupational or income level it was always the older, more stable, and more prosperous who were the electors. These were men, often with older children living at home, who could afford to take the chief tenancy of a house and then sublet to others, or who lived in the model dwellings whose owners were conscientious in getting their tenants on the register. Thus we have a Greco-Roman "democracy" of paterfamilias, with a significant proportion of even unskilled older men having the vote, but very few others.

Having set out in detail the contours of the East End electorate, the author then goes on to analyze its political cultures. The plural is appropriate here, since one of Brodie's major arguments is the importance of extremely local factors in explaining political behavior, down to ward level. The details vary considerably, but overall, the East End electorate is characterized as one which was intensely influenced by the personal and moral, by a candidate's character and reputation and by factors of often paternalist guidance by clergy, church or chapel visitors, or benevolent employers. So far, much of this is similar to Stedman Jones, but Brodie explains the emphasis on character by reference to the crucial role played by corrupt middlemen, gangers and subcontractors in the East End economy. Workers had a very direct experience of bribery and jobbery, and much union activity of the period was designed precisely to establish direct employer-worker relations and to cut out the parasites that preyed on them. In regard to elite guidance, he makes two general points: first, that the East End was not the godless wilderness of urban myth, but an area where functioning and widely inclusive parish or chapel communities were common; second, that "respectability," as the opposite of street-based sociability, laid many prosperous workers (and especially their lonely wives) open to influence from socially superior district nurses, church visitors and the like. Thus, the failure of the electors to respond to larger ideological issues was less the result of an immature political culture than a reasoned reaction to the forms and structures of daily life. The specific results of these factors, in a series of close studies of particular locales, are often counter-intuitive: the Tory areas were the wealthiest ones, not the most poverty-stricken; poorer areas were more likely to be progressive; nonconformity and liberalism did not go together in the East End, and Brodie even paints the West Ward of Stepney, with its large Jewish population, as a hotbed of Toryism in a period of conservative anti-alien agitation.

This work is a useful corrective to a historiography which has perhaps concentrated too much on the discursive construction of the East End as "Other," rather than upon its more prosaic and less exotic reality. Nonetheless, in part Brodie's argument rests on a determination to see the glass as half full rather than half empty. Many dockers may have had steadier employment than once believed, but even so, 40 percent of them were true casuals. The East End may not have been uniformly impoverished, but its poverty level, at 38 percent, was the highest in London and it must have represented the single largest concentration of social and economic misery in the nation. Similarly, its enfranchisement levels were low by national borough standards. What Brodie gives us then is less a "politics of the poor" than a very detailed study of the politics of those East Enders who were not casualized and not impoverished, which is to say–once one subtracts the local middle class–the politics of a bare majority of the workers. The politics of the truly poor is dealt with in an interesting section on lodging-house culture, but in the nature of things it cannot be studied through electoral results. Indeed, one of the larger impli-

cations of Brodie's work–though it is not dealt with by the author himself–is that 1918 did in fact witness the creation of a *qualitatively* different electorate, even among males. In other words, there was an important franchise factor, but one which operated on the basis of age, family responsibilities and security of employment (as well as gender), not occupational group or social class. Historians have not yet fully addressed the possible effects of the transition to a truly universal franchise.

Brodie's work is a model of a revised doctoral thesis, being based on very solid and painstaking scholarship, but pushing its evidence in significant and often insightful new directions. His call for a political history based on rigorous local studies is well taken, although two factors might inhibit a wide emulation of its methods and aims. Not very many areas of Britain were pored over by journalists, social workers and pioneer sociologists in the kind of detail that makes this study possible; finally, its price might keep it off the shelves of all but the least "casualized" and impoverished historians.

Notes

[1]. Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), and "Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London 1870-1900: Notes on the Remaking of a Working Class," *Journal of Social History* 7 (1973-74): pp. 460-508.

[2]. John Davis, "Slums and the Vote," *Historical Research* 64 (1991): pp. 375-378; and R. McKibbin, H. G. C. Matthew and J. A. Kay, "The Franchise Factor in the Rise of the Labour Party," *English Historical Review* 91 (1976), republished in R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

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