
Original Article

Historicizing social inequality: A Victorian archive for contemporary moral discourse

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Abstract Starting from the uniformity of moral statements about social inequality during the Obama presidency, this article historicizes those statements by analyzing an archive of discourse drawn from Victorian England. Despite its distance in time and place, the archive reveals striking commonalities with the terms and phrases that invariably populate debates about social inequality in the American political field today. Drawing on critical theories of the archive, this article leverages those commonalities for the hermeneutic purpose of historicizing moral discourse. As I argue, moral statements like "equality of opportunity" and "equality of reward/outcome" resulted from the application of civil ideas and oppositions to interpret phenomena like poverty and social inequality during the eventful history of the Victorian period. The findings challenge T.H. Marshall's classic argument about the origin of social rights as descendent of civil rights. The article concludes by discussing the broader implications of historicizing moral discourse, demonstrating the reflexive use of the archive to engage in a politics of meaning about social inequality.

American Journal of Cultural Sociology (2017) 5, 225–260.

doi:10.1057/s41290-016-0008-4; published online 5 September 2016

Keywords: morality; social inequality; archive; Victorian Britain; civil sphere; discourse

Introduction

I believe this is the defining challenge of our time: Making sure our economy works for every working American. It's why I ran for President ... It drives everything I do in this office. And I know I've raised this issue before, and some will ask why I raise the issue again right now. I do it because the outcomes of the debates we're having right now – whether it's health care, or the budget, or reforming our housing and financial systems – all these things will have real, practical



implications for every American. And I am convinced that the decisions we make on these issues over the next few years will determine whether or not our children will grow up in an America where *opportunity* is real. Now, the premise that we've all created *equal* is the opening line in the American story. And while we don't promise *equal outcomes*, we have strived to deliver *equal opportunity* – the idea that *success* doesn't depend on being *born into wealth or privilege*, it depends on *effort* and *merit*. And with every chapter we've added to that story, we've worked hard to put those words into practice.

– Barack Obama¹

Statements like this appear with such regularity in American political discourse that they have become unremarkable. The italicized terms and phrases seem so obvious, common and regular that they are invoked and received with little notice. They are platitudes. But platitudes are nothing if not meaningful, suggestive of deep roots, deep enough to signal the *doxic*, the commonsensical, the “it goes without saying,” in this case about social inequality. The task of this article is to make these familiar terms seem strange again by critically reappropriating them with the help of a historical archive. The larger goal is to rejuvenate a politics of meaning by using historical analysis to attain reflexivity about social inequality as a domain of moral experience.

Obama is not alone in making claims like these, as a small sampling reveals. From the opposite end of the political spectrum, Paul Ryan argues in rebuttal of Obama's claims: “He's shifting us away from the American idea—from a society of upward mobility—and we're talking to each other more in class terms ... Instead of focusing on *equality of outcomes*, we should be focusing on *equality of opportunity*” (Calmes, 2014). Hillary Clinton, in launching her presidential campaign, makes the claim: “One thing I've learned is that *talent* is universal—you can find it anywhere—but *opportunity* is not. Too many of our kids never have the chance to learn and thrive as they should and as we need them to” (*Time Magazine* 13 June, 2015). In a similar campaign launch speech, Jeb Bush states: “So I am getting involved in politics again, because that's where the work has to begin. The *opportunity* gap is the defining issue of our time. More Americans are stuck at their income levels than ever before. It's very hard for people to go from the bottom rungs of the economy to the top. Or even to the middle ... Let's start with the first principle: When it comes to ensuring *opportunity* and a *chance* at *success*, the most important factor isn't government. It's a committed *family*” (*Vox* 5 February, 2015).

From an array of positions in the American political field, the terminology and phrases remain essentially the same. “Equality of opportunity,” “equality of

¹ The White House, “Remarks by the President on Economic Mobility” (4 December 2013).



outcome,” “merit,” “talent,” “effort,” “privilege” resound everywhere in this space with little questioning. Indeed, the space is so saturated with their semiotic resonance that one’s position can be inferred (or imposed) on the basis of a very small number of statements (*The Federalist* 28 July, 2015). Importantly, this is not limited to the high-level and highly charged domain of electoral politics where the marketing phraseology of political and rhetorical gamesmanship is always at play. Identical terminologies are equally resonant in debates about social inequality in the larger public sphere, where they are tightly interwoven with the expression of “structures of feeling” that are anything but cynical (see McCall, 2013). Here too we witness a remarkable level of repetition, uniformity, and predictability in what it makes sense to say.

What explains this degree of coherence? One might claim that an “exhaustion of cultural and semantic energies” accounts for it, as discussions at all levels have settled into certain statements about social inequality, proof that the discursive space of possibility has closed unnoticeably (Kompridis, 2006, p. 276). I partially agree with this claim, but the further argument offered in this article is that the repetition and regularity we observe in moral statements about inequality is evidence not of a lack in this sense but of a certain kind of *presence*. In other words, it is the effect of social inequality *put into discourse* that gives a structure to what can and cannot be said. What we observe today is a “regularity of dispersion” in moral statements about social inequality as the reflection of certain limits in the “devices” we’ve inherited “for speaking about it” (Foucault, 1978, p. 34).

This article offers a critical analysis of contemporary moral statements about social inequality by attempting to capture this regime of discourse. But to do so, I take an indirect approach and use an implicit comparison. Rather than concentrating on present-day statements alone, this article historicizes the statements by placing them inside a historical archive. The goal is to effectively “defamiliarize” moral statements about social inequality by relocating their familiar use in an unfamiliar context.

The idea of “the archive” is useful for this purpose, and not simply as a method to analyze historical data across time. It is also useful for its conceptual polysemy.² An archive is defined as an accessible place where a record of the past is catalogued and retrievable. Archives are libraries or government repositories in the most literal meaning. From a critical perspective, this definition is given a *figurative* meaning. An archive here refers to any place that “produces” facts and meanings through recourse to the past and does not serve merely as a neutral “source” of it (Derrida, 1996; Stoler, 2002, p. 96). What is retrievable from an archive is a history, but more specifically one that discloses a “law of what can be said ... [a] system that establishes statements” (Foucault, 1972, p. 130). Visiting

² Here I follow “the archival turn” in historical scholarship that is deeply informed by postcolonial theory and psychoanalysis (see Steedman, 2001).



an archive can therefore provide a critical vantage point on present-time discourse because, as producers of meaning, archives in this sense retain a forward-feeding transcendence of time: “the correct grammatical tense of an archive is the future perfect: ‘When it will have been’” (Steedman, 2001, p. 7).

To understand the effect of an archive (in the figurative meaning) on discourse, consider two recent arguments, both of which analyze contemporary moral statements about social inequality, and both of which appear to archive those statements in classical liberalism. First, Meyer (2008) argues that contemporary social inequality discourse is the synthetic result of the “evolution [of] modern schemes and scripts” like individualism, equality, and progress. The historical location for these institutional scripts is liberalism, which Meyer unproblematically credits with their invention. A similar account is evident in Abbott’s (2016) argument that “social injustice” is the most appropriate translation of “social inequality.” Sifting through both lay and sociological discourse, Abbott reveals a host of moral assumptions that dictate the limited range of meanings applied to social inequality. He also historically locates these assumptions in liberalism with little explanation.

According to both accounts, liberalism is the historical source of contemporary moral statements about social inequality. It is, in other words, the *archive* that reveals the range of terminologies, phrases, meanings, and practices that can be *about* social inequality. On the face of it, this attribution isn’t wrong; but it also isn’t benign. Derrida (echoing Weber) claims that “there is no political power without control of the archive” (1996, p. 4). The archival attribution to liberalism would therefore seem to be a subtle form of “discursive power” that conceals more than it reveals (Reed, 2013). If any moral statement about social inequality “will have been” a statement retrievable from liberalism, this discloses only a “sheltered” history for the discourse, favorable to certain interests. Whatever the intended referent for “liberalism” is in these arguments, it safely jettisons what might otherwise become available through a more careful examination of discursive history. In this sense, crediting liberalism successfully performs a “labor of dehistoricization” for contemporary terminologies and phrases (Bourdieu, 2000, pp. 43–48). By contrast, “producing more archive” by revisiting a discursive history allows for a different set of effects to extend from the archive as mediator between past and future (Derrida, 1996, p. 68).

This article visits an archive that includes the statements given above, but one in which liberalism is present only as a distant background condition, offering little purchase on a hermeneutic understanding of the most resonant statements. The archive in question is drawn from Victorian England in the period between approximately 1834–1901. During this time nearly all of the above (contemporary) statements appeared in the voices of clergy, economists, government administrators, aristocrats, middle-class political elites, social reformers, and revolutionaries, this motley crew sharing a concern with poverty and social inequality as moral phenomena related to justice. This concern developed in stages over this period,



traceable to different events that provide the skeleton of the archive: starting with the problematization of poverty signaled by the 1834 New Poor Law, continuing through the Lancashire Cotton Famine during the mid-Victorian period and culminating with late-Victorian “socialisms” and social reform.

This archive is the product of my own “colligation” of these events as part of the historical formation of a discursive field (Spillman, 2004).³ It is not, in this respect, drawn from an already archived process (like “the liberal tradition”). Particular emphasis is placed on cultural creativity by historical actors in situations that ultimately leads to the elaboration of familiar statements like “equality of opportunity” and “equality of reward.” As I claim, this discloses a set of relationships that places these familiar phrases in a line of historical unfolding with unexpected partners. The punitive New Poor Law, for example, becomes a precondition for the appearance of later, more recognizable, and morally resonant statements like “equality of opportunity.” Thus, the Victorian archive ultimately provides a glimpse at a discursive field that “structures a moral experience” of social inequality in remarkably similar form to that same experience found today (Foucault, 1985, p. 37; see Somers and Block, 2014, chap. 6; Hadley, 1997; Huysen, 2014, p. 278).

As mentioned, the repetition and predictability of contemporary statements about social inequality is hypothesized as the effect of social inequality put into discourse. While we can observe the “regularity of dispersion” as a consequence of this, the difficulty comes in identifying with any precision the discourse(s) that social inequality is “put into,” as that remains the inheritance of a historical tradition in which these transcendent conditions have largely been concealed by temporal distance. A historical approach is advantageous in this respect, and not merely for the clarity of hindsight it provides. Focusing on a historical *process* offers the chance to leverage empirical details drawn from the archive to suggest how and where to situate contemporary moral statements as part of discourse.

Specifically, the Victorian archive reveals how, at first, “the poor” were put into a *civil* discourse and its pre-existing set of oppositions (Alexander, 2006, 2013). This “problematized” the condition of *poverty*, giving it the interpretation as both inside and outside a “disembedded” economic sphere (Polanyi, 1944; Somers and Block, 2014). This initiated a “dual membership” interpretation that would eventually be placed on *all* social classes (e.g., “the poor,” “the labouring class,” “the middle class,” “the wealthy”) in British society, with a foot in both a civil sphere of universalist solidarity and an economic sphere of labor exploitation and capital ownership (Alexander, 2013, p. 137). The contradictions between the spheres would be a primary site for the “incitement to” discourse about all too familiar social phenomena, including unemployment, social marginalization, and “progress and poverty.” I colligate

³ A colligation refers to the empirical practice of “grouping of events in an identifiable process” (Spillman, 2004, p. 224).

each of these stages through an empirical tracing of historical events. The result, at the end of the 19th century, is a discursive field structured around two semiotic oppositions—*independence/dependence* and *responsibility/helplessness*—inside of which social inequality becomes a distinctively *moral* problem.

This narrative provides an example of what it means for social inequality to *have been* put into discourse. Given the resonance of what results, the implication seems clear: the colligated process traced in this article (i.e., the Victorian discursive field) provides an archive for contemporary statements about social inequality more readily than does liberalism. Here we can more easily and accurately retrieve the discursive rules that shape the “specific regularities of what we can and cannot say” about social inequality (Stoler, 2002, p. 96). At the same time, it makes our statements more alive and less platitudinous by defamiliarizing them, on the one hand restoring their historically specific *raison d’être*, on the other hand disclosing transcendent conditions that situate them as moral interpretations within other possibilities.⁴

Empirically, this account challenges scholarship on the Victorian period and the emergence of social rights in two respects. First, while it mirrors in many ways T.H. Marshall’s (1950) argument for the “basic human equality of membership” (or citizenship) as a driving factor for a resonant discourse of social justice during the 19th and 20th centuries of British history, my account shows that the process cannot be neatly segmented into the “civil, political, and social elements” (or “episodes”) that Marshall highlights. Rather, the emergence of what he classifies as “social rights” is intertwined with a civil discourse from the start and remains so *throughout* this period. This means that social rights, at least in the form of moral principles and statements, appear earlier than Marshall claims (before 20th century welfare states). In this regard, the genesis of social rights (e.g., “equality of opportunity” or “equality of reward”) did not first require fundamental “changes to [the] egalitarian principles” that preceded them (Marshall, 1950, p. 46).⁵

Second, while my account supports Alexander’s (2006) argument for a “civil sphere” in which a transcendent moral discourse is always already present, the argument here is that this alone cannot account for the form that social rights

⁴ The use of history for the purposes of defamiliarization finds eloquent statement in Heidegger’s claim about art: “What seems natural to us is just something familiar in a long tradition that has forgotten the unfamiliar source from which it arose. And yet this unfamiliar source once struck man as strange and caused him to think and wonder.”

⁵ This also reflects my main argument against much of the historiography of the Victorian period, which treats the distinction between the early-Victorian and late-Victorian period as *categorical* in their different moralities. This makes what transpired in the 1880s–1890s “a problem” or a puzzle (see Emy, 1973). Some historians place the turning point earlier than the 1880s (like the 1860s; see Hennock, 1976), but the general consensus is, echoing Marshall, that something fundamentally changed between 1834 and 1890 (see Himmelfarb, 1991; Harris, 1992; Bevir, 2011). I claim that while changes did occur, they were not the fundamental departure that this implies, but instead a rearticulation of the same discursive strain.



principles took during the Victorian period. The intersection of that discourse with “eventful history” is necessary to supplement its pre-established ideas and oppositions with the contingent factors that shape their formulation in this context (Sewell, 2005). In this respect, the civil sphere serves as the slower-moving background for the unfolding of the discursive field in the 19th century, which means there are effectively two temporalities at work: one of structure (civil sphere discourse) and one of hermeneutics (Victorian discursive field) (see Ricoeur, 1974). While the former doesn’t change over this period (contrary to Marshall’s claims), the archive rests squarely inside the latter, as practices, classifications and ethical subjectivities all appear with contemporary resonance, easily retrievable in their context, with the cumulative effect of making social inequality to be a powerfully signifying moral object. Thus, the historical origins of the archive emerge contingently, but it remains situated in transcendent conditions that, importantly, can afford different interpretations.

In what follows, I trace the different stages through which the Victorian discursive field unfolded in the 19th century. This culminates in a range of discourse about social inequality that has a variety of effects by the end of the century. I conclude the article by revisiting the main empirical claims and address how the archive challenges the settling of contemporary discourse about social inequality by unconcealing a forgotten set of associations.

Three Stages of Unfolding

The unfolding of the discursive field was launched with a “problematization” of poverty in the pre-Victorian and early Victorian periods, which culminated in the New Poor Law of 1834, then with an unexpected forceful process in the early 1860s (the Lancashire Cotton Famine) that challenged this initial settling of the discourse, leading to “charity organization,” and finally with the advancement of what we might label as “social justice” arguments in the 1880s and 1890s. These stages include “events” in Sewell’s (2005) meaning of the term. What transpired in each of them, their contingent sequencing, had an “unerasable and determining signature” on the final outcome (Sewell, 2005, p. 113). While a civil discourse is found in each of the three stages, its presence in this “eventful history” doesn’t result in dual membership until the last stage. The discursive field takes shape during that stage when we see the introduction of the key statements “equality of opportunity” and “equality of reward” inside a semiotic space structured by the binaries independence versus dependence and responsibility versus helplessness. While these oppositions were always already present in civil discourse, “events” had to happen, in this sense, to enable their formulation in circumstances that shaped the kind of statements they *could* generate.



Problematizing Poverty

The first stage of the archive consists of the problematization of poverty. In Foucault's terms, problematization refers simply to an interpretation applied to form of "being" that renders it questionable, controversial, indeed, *problematic*, thus "inciting" that phenomenon to discourse (1985, p. 11). What happened in the pre-Victorian and early Victorian period was a problematization of poverty in this specific sense, that marked a break with a prior discourse (the "discourse on the poor") by placing a *moral* interpretation on poverty (see Dean, 1991; Somers and Block, 2014). The key actor here was the English cleric and economist Thomas Robert Malthus whose famous *Essay on the Principle of Population* ([1798–1832]1992) would have a lasting influence on the unfolding of the discursive field. I argue that by problematizing poverty, he and others at the time introduced a civil motive for the poor: "self-dependence" (e.g., independence).⁶ As institutionalized in the practices and technologies (testing, confinement, disciplining, transformation) of the New Poor Law, the classification of paupers as the "dependent poor" would drive the new discourse through its subsequent iterations.

Prior to Malthus, the "discourse on the poor" had targeted questions of population, subsistence, and productivity. Informed by physiocratic principles, magistrates and justices of the peace were tasked with finding the most productive use for the poor as a labor source contributing to the strength and wealth of the nation. The Elizabethan Poor Laws that preceded the Victorian period reflected this orientation in its administration of the poor: very simply, "those able to work were to be employed, those unable to work relieved, and those unwilling to work confined" (see Appleby, 1978; Hammond and Hammond, 1920, pp. 10–16). As Dean (1991, p. 50) explains, this distinct emphasis on "make work" schemes was a fundamental operating principle for the Poor Law system during the 18th century (see also Coats 1973).

Arguably the most revealing portrait of the "discourse on the poor" comes from John Stuart Mill. Writing in 1848, a period when it had vanished almost everywhere, Mill emphasized the "theory of dependency and protection" that underwrote the practices and beliefs that had hitherto guided treatment of the poor:

... the lot of the poor, in all thing which affect them collectively, should be regulated *for* them, not *by* them. They should not be required or encouraged to think for themselves, or give to their own reflection or forecast an influential voice in the determination of their destiny. It is the

⁶ As Somers and Block put it: "For 500 years the poor had been a sociological classification of the propertyless that carried no moral judgment ... By grafting the moral categories of desert, merit, and self-sufficiency onto the condition of poverty and a volatile labor market, Malthus [helped institute an] ideational change from poverty to perversity..." (2014, p. 176).



duty of the higher classes to think for them, and to take the responsibility of their lot, as the commander and officers of an army take that of the soldiers composing them.... The rich should be *in loco parentis* to the poor, guiding and restraining them like children. ... Their morality and religion should be provided for them by their superiors, who should see them properly taught it, and should do all that is necessary to ensure their being, in return for labor and attachment, properly fed, clothed, housed, spiritually edified and innocently amused (1848, pp. 319–320).

There is a mild sarcasm evident in this portrayal, which Mill admits is an idealization that never fully existed. Yet its presence continued to be felt long into the 19th century. While this image idealizes “the good times of our forefathers,” it was one which both conservative and radical critics (from Duke of Rutland to Thomas Carlyle to Robert Owen) of industrial capitalism and the “cash nexus” gravitated toward, using it to develop their own (reactive) solutions to the crisis they perceived around them (Lowy, 1987).

As Polanyi (1944, pp. 116–135) describes in detail, writers like Joseph Townsend, Edmund Burke and especially Malthus marked a turning point away from this discourse and its theory of dependence and protection. The experience of the Speenhamland system of poor relief in the 1790s, which, among other things, attempted to make up for wage deficits with an “assize” linked to the price of bread, left the impression that the kind of relief efforts guided by the discourse of the poor devalued labor and, more importantly, created “dependency,” something that Malthus and company regarded as profane and immoral instead of a “sacred” paternalistic relationship with social superiors (see Fraser and Gordon, 1994). Even before this Townsend (1786, p. 20) had claimed that “poverty and wretchedness have increased in exact proportion to the efforts ... made for subsistence to the poor,” a view later echoed by Malthus. In 1795, Edmund Burke (1795, pp. 11–12) articulated a central tenet of the “natural and self-adjusting economy” drawn from Adam Smith, claiming that an employer would do nothing detrimental to the worker, since it was in the employer’s interest to keep his workers “well fed, [sleek], plump and fit for [use]” in the same manner as his horses (as “capital”). Charity was a matter of private discretion instead of public moral duty. The social dependence between rich and poor, if it operated anywhere, was found only in the employment relation (Thompson, 1993, pp. 202–203).⁷ Thus, by the 1790s, the discourse on the poor had been traded for the problematization of poverty as a moral condition.

It was not until Malthus published his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1992[1798–1832]) that the tides truly turned however. He was pivotal for two

⁷ As Steinberg (2003) reveals, the legal apparatus for the capitalist employment relation during the Victorian period remained at least partially founded on master/servant forms of labor control. This is alluded to in Burke’s comment, though it remained contradictory vis-a-vis independence/dependence as the basis for moral evaluation of the poor and, as emphasized below, “the labouring class.”



reasons: first, in claiming that poverty was a function of “population exceeding subsistence,” he made the presence of the poor a matter of natural law, effectively beyond the power of the “higher classes” to alter. In this sense, their virtue could not be measured by how well or poorly they performed as *loco parentis* to the dependent poor. Second, Malthus placed the major responsibility for poverty (as a form of “being” in Foucault’s sense) on the shoulders of the poor themselves. As other scholars have noted, this “perversity hypothesis” reconstituted the poor as a “moral object” (Somers and Block, 2014, p. 176; Hirschman, 1991, p. 28). Overlooked by these arguments, however, is the *discursive* dimension intertwined with Malthus’ efforts in this respect—specifically, how he used a “civil” discourse to problematize poverty and perversify the poor in this way.⁸

According to Malthus, it was “want of foresight” on the part of the poor that “[encouraged] the procreation of children ... absolutely fatal to the industry which is to support them” (1992, p. 253). This is the basis for the interpretation of “the poor” as “the morally perverse.” In a complete reversal of the “theory of dependence and protection” described by Mill, Malthus’ solution to poverty demanded that the poor act as *reasonable* individuals. Malthus was so insistent on this that he called for the poor to be taught the laws of population, otherwise “we cannot justly accuse them of improvidence and want of industry, till they act as they do now, after it has been brought home to their comprehensions, that they are themselves the cause of their own poverty; that the means of redress are in their own hands...” (228). In other words, the moral duty of the poor is to think for themselves, to calculate their chances of supporting a family and to act accordingly.

Malthus creates a specific knowledge about the poor that he constitutes as normative rules for them. This summons an ethical subjectivity into being through the examination and enforcement of a “civil” self. By making the poor responsible for their poverty, Malthus also made them ethical subjects who were *self*-dependent. Hence, embedded in Malthus’ argument is the claim that the poor are *moral* when they are rational, reasonable, self-controlled and realistic. They are *immoral* when they are irrational, dependent, and wild-passionate. This implicit contrast matches the binary of motives through which a civil sphere constructs a democratic community of equals (Alexander, 2006, p. 57).

It might seem surprising, then, that the most palpable influence of Malthus’ doctrine took the form of technologies and practices of examination, disciplining and confinement. When the New Poor Law passed in 1834, two years after the publication of Malthus’ final edition of the *Essay*, it transformed the Poor

⁸ How intentional or inadvertent was Malthus’ use of civil discourse? The question is beyond the scope of this article to draw a reasonable conclusion. But several clues are readily available. The *Essay on the Principle of Population* was written in response to “speculations on the perfectability of man and society” (Malthus, 1992, p. 7) by, among others, William Godwin and Nicolas de Condorcet. In no small sense was the book framed in reaction to “radical” interpretations of the French Revolution in Britain, of which Malthus’ own father was partial (Claeys, 2007).



Law system by making it punitive.⁹ “Outdoor relief,” or aid given without entering a workhouse, was severely restricted for all and abolished entirely for the “able-bodied.” Meanwhile, the aid given for those who did enter a workhouse dictated a treatment of “less eligibility.” The workhouse internee could not have a quality of life better than the “independent labourer of the lowest class,” as reflected in the standard of living imposed inside the workhouse. In order to ensure that a claim for relief was merited, the New Poor Law instituted these “less eligible” criteria (e.g., poor quality of life in the workhouse) as fixed rules for a “self-acting test of the claim of the applicant,” making sure they were not “paupers.” This guaranteed that “merit [would be] the condition on which relief is to be given” (Poor Law Commissioners, 1834, pp. 264, 272).

As the New Poor Law monitored the potential for this immoral subjectivity, it brought the problematization of poverty (and the perversity of “the poor”) to widespread public attention, while its technology institutionalized the notion of self-dependence. Workhouse internees admitted their inability to act reasonably and rationally (e.g., “civilly”) in submitting to the “self-acting test” and entering the workhouse. Once inside, a disciplinary apparatus was organized to transform them into (docile) subjectivities capable of embodying civil motives. As Marx would claim, the administration of the New Poor Law “disciplined and perpetuated pauperism.” In no sense did it “seek to eliminate it” (1954, p. 67).

What the Malthusian episode of the archive reveals, then, is the introduction of an ethical subjectivity and a threat of penalty for deviance from normative rules. This stemmed from a problematization of poverty that broke with “dependence and protection” using a civil discourse. The poor were now (potential) civil subjects possessive of moral motives; in the same breath, they were (potential) deviants blameworthy for their poverty.¹⁰ The launching point for the development of the archive is precisely this combination, as evident in a phrase like “self-dependence.” A making visible of “the poor” that simultaneously *occluded* them, it institutionalized *ambivalence* through the punitive operation of the New Poor Law. Reconciling this contradiction would prove a

⁹ This not to imply that the New Poor Law was only informed by Malthusianism or that the influence was purely secular. The “theology of scarcity” developed by a group of clerics and lawyers referred to as the Noetics was also profoundly influential (see Dean, 1991). The Noetics were notable for combining two hitherto unrelated disciplines: political economy and natural theology. This led them toward a strong defense of Malthusianism while subscribing to a Providential view of social order that made economic activity the site of tests of moral condition (Hilton, 1988, p. 21). In this view, the workhouses that the New Poor Law emphasized were not meant to improve its inhabitants, but rather to *deter* the poor from seeking aid and violating Providence by receiving it (Mandler, 1990, p. 101). The civil discourse that informed the problematization of poverty was partially drawn from this theology.

¹⁰ This seems less surprising given the paradoxical correlation between the rise of “free markets” and the rise of the penitentiary (Harcourt, 2011). As Losurdo argues (2011, pp. 297–323), if liberalism is present here, it is present in the binary between “sacred and profane spaces” and the tests that maintain the boundary. Only certain subjectivities can enter and remain in the sacred space.

fruitful discursive practice in the years to come. New classifications would be elaborated; new practices would come into being on this basis. Marking less a departure than a rearticulation, these changes remained within the discursive logic of “self-dependence” (the binary of independence/dependence) whose heritage is the early-Victorian problematization of poverty.

The Lancashire Cotton Famine

The immediate effects of the New Poor law were mixed. As Polanyi argues (1944, p. 86), it essentially “abolished the ‘right to live’” by introducing the institutional basis for the complete commodification of labor in a “disembedded market” and an increasingly differentiated economic sphere. Material “self-reproduction” would now be achieved through market imperatives and the “compulsion to buy” necessities like clothing and food (Wood, 2002, p. 54). Opponents, meanwhile, labeled the New Poor Law “the starvation act,” and an opposition movement took shape almost as soon as the 1834 reform was passed (Edsall, 1971). In many places allowances and assizes persisted, and it wasn’t until the Poor Law Commission that administered the law (later replaced by the more centralized Poor Law Board) instituted the Outdoor Labour Test order in 1842 and the Outdoor Relief Prohibitory order in 1844 that the system envisioned in 1834 could truly come to fruition (Webb and Webb, 1929, pp. 183–188).

All of this serves as a prelude for the most significant, mid-century challenge to self-dependence: the Lancashire Cotton Famine. Lasting between 1861 and 1865, the “famine” as it was popularly labeled was triggered by the sudden decrease of raw cotton imports from the southern United States into the cotton-spinning industries of England, due to the Union blockade of Confederate ports. The epicenter of the crisis was the county of Lancashire in the northwest. Mass unemployment and work stoppages resulted there and in neighboring areas, leading to a spike in applicants for Poor Law relief (Watts, 1866, p. 121).

For the discursive logic of self-dependence, the famine proved disastrous: how to enforce independence instead of dependence in a situation characterized by “*compulsory* idleness”? The latter phrase is commonly found in the literature of the period. As a new statement it had the capacity to define and disclose what was happening. The Earl of Derby, for instance, appointed by Parliament as chairman of an emergency committee convened to address the crisis, used it in December 1862, at a county meeting held during the height of the famine, attended by those with “rank, and wealth, and influence” in the region, including Poor Law administrators:

We are met together upon an occasion which must call forth the most painful, and at the same ought to excite, and I am sure will excite, the most kindly feelings of our human nature. We are met to consider the means of



palliating ... a great national calamity, the like whereof in modern times has never been witnessed in this favoured land—a calamity, which it has imposed for those who are the chief sufferers to foresee, or, if they had foreseen, taken any steps to avoid—a calamity which, though shared by the nation at large, falls more peculiarly and with the heaviest weight upon this hitherto prosperous and wealthy district—a calamity which has converted this teeming hive of industry into a stagnant desert of *compulsory inaction and idleness*—a calamity which has converted that which was the source of our greatest wealth into the deepest abyss of impoverishment—a calamity which has impoverished the wealthy, which has reduced men of easy fortunes to the greatest straits, which has brought distress upon those who have hitherto been somewhat above the world by the exercise of frugal industry, and which has reduced honest and struggling poverty to a state of absolute and humiliating destitution (Waugh, 1867, p. 150).

“Compulsory idleness” serves here as a contrast to the “teeming hive of industry.” While this refers to a general description of the situation in Lancashire during the famine, the term finds a quite literal embodiment in the group most affected by it: the cotton operatives put out of work by the blockade. They appear honest, reasonable and therefore blameless in this interpretation—clearly a different ethical subjectivity than the “dependent poor” vilified by the New Poor Law. “The laboring class” in Lancashire could not have reasonably “foreseen” the impersonal forces that would, indeed, *force* them out of work. The “honest and struggling poverty” of this group becomes “humiliating” when their self-dependence is unwillingly traded for idleness. In this respect, the crisis presented by the Lancashire famine was specifically a crisis involving the “demoralisation [of] the labouring class by their present compulsory idleness and dependence on alms” (*London Standard* 28 April, 1863; see also *The Spectator* 2 May, 1863; *Macmillan’s Magazine* April, 1863).

Here we have a new classification—“the labouring class”—that is explicitly put into opposition with the “dependent poor.” Given that the Poor Law was the principal institution in place to deal with the Lancashire crisis, the difficulty quickly became addressing the problems of honest laborers during the Famine using punitive technologies intended to transform profane (uncivil) subjectivities. The problem wasn’t that the system put in place by the 1834 Poor Law reform *couldn’t* meet the relief demands in Lancashire, it was that it *shouldn’t* try: “[It] is neither desirable nor possible that such an institution [the Poor Law] should retain its peculiar character, and yet not act with a certain harshness quite inappropriate to the circumstances of the new class with which it has to deal” (*Saturday Review* 17 May, 1862).

A casting about for solutions beyond the Poor Law subsequently occurred. In June 1862, a bill introduced in Parliament called The Public Works

(Manufacturing Districts) Bill intended to put the unemployed to work improving public utility and sanitary systems in the cotton regions. During the ensuing debate, some MPs favored a sponsored emigration of the unemployed, with Australia the preferred destination. Others thought the Poor Law could be modified to meet the relief demand without punishing “the honest labouring class” (Watts, 1866, pp. 312–319). The bill passed by the end of the month distributed funds to local governments in the region to organize municipal projects. And yet, by this time, the solution for the problem of compulsory idleness had already been determined: public charity.

Working independently of Parliament, the Lord Mayor in London had initiated “the Lancashire and Cheshire Operative Relief Fund” in May 1862 to distribute private donations to the affected workers. By some estimates the fund delivered nearly a million pounds sterling to the region, combined with in-kind goods like clothing and food (Watts, 1866, pp. 233–234; Henderson, 1969, p. 79; Waugh, 1867, p. 216). The problem was that the expenditures funded through charity and distributed by local committees almost always exceeded the funds distributed through the Poor Law (see Watts, 1866, pp. 462–467). While associating the punitive measures of the Poor Law with the honest laboring class was to be strictly avoided, charity was criticized for its polluting effect on self-dependence. The fear was that a “general fund would only invite a general scramble” into the region, and this would “aggravate the pauperism of the country” (*Saturday Review* 17 May, 1862). Yet judging from a series of letters published in *The Times* earlier that spring, which gave impetus to the Lord Mayor’s fund, charity was the solution favored by the majority of unemployed workers (see Waugh, 1867, pp. 209–216).

Not surprisingly, then, *charity* became the principal issue affecting the discourse in the years following the Cotton Famine. Debates about charity, its relationship to “the poor” and the “honest labouring class,” and its difference from the Poor Law would drive the construction of the archive still further. In this sense, the Famine unfolded as an “event” in the prototypical sense of creating “ruptures [that] make repair difficult and... a novel re-articulation possible” (Sewell, 2005, p. 228). The Lancashire Famine (arising ultimately from a world system with the British Empire at the core) occurred in a civil discourse (the discursive logic of self-dependence) that “gave concrete shape and meaningful character” to its material effects in a twofold way: generating a new classification (“the labouring class”) and a new practice (“public charity”). There is no way to understand the prominence these two would attain without understanding both sides of this equation.

By the same token, self-dependence in the strict Malthusian sense was fundamentally destabilized and altered in the wake of the Famine. Because of this (eventful) interaction with the Famine, charity became the principal concern for those seeking to maintain a self-dependent (civil) poor while acknowledging the very real possibility of “compulsory idleness.” Self-dependence was not



relinquished in this transition despite its limitations being powerfully revealed by mass unemployment. It was still deeply insinuated in the construction of “the labouring class” as a morally distinguishable subjectivity from “paupers.” The *rearticulation* of self-dependence, in this sense, becomes particularly clear with the organization most emblematic of the period stretching between the Lancashire event and the 1880s and 1890s: the Charity Organisation Society.

Charity Organization

Evidence of the impact of charity before and after the Famine is revealed by the numbers: in 1857, the aggregate income of London charities was estimated at £2,441,967 (Low 1862). By 1869, that same income was estimated at £4,079,262, with £7,368,862 coming in total expenditure on the poor (Hawksey, 1869). In one sense, this growth was a response to the Cotton Famine, yet it also reflected a reaction by elites to economic (and climatic) crises experienced in London between 1866 and 1869 (Ryan, 1985, pp. 142–145; Boyer, 2004, pp. 410–411). For many, the growing significance of charity marked the persistence of the kind of “outdoor relief” that the New Poor Law intended to eliminate. Thus, it undermined the “natural distinction” between deserving and undeserving, between a civil and uncivil poor. Charity also proved fatal to self-dependence. Its free availability allowed the poor to choose “mendicancy over work” (Stedman Jones, 1971, p. 255). This worry is best summarized by Charles Trevelyan, a civil servant and noted student of Malthus: “in the sweat of thy face thou eat bread till thou return upon the ground.’ The effect of modern charity has been to suspend this primeval law” (1870, p. 6).

At least these were the suspicions, and they only grew after the Cotton Famine. The reaction to them was predictable: a reassertion—indeed, a “crusade”—of the tenets of 1834 initiated through the Poor Law (Mowat, 1961; Mackinnon, 1987; Hurren, 2007). The president of the Poor Law Board George Goschen published the “Goschen minute” in 1869, which featured a biting criticism of “indiscriminate giving” in the wake of Lancashire and drew attention to the lack of coordination between the Poor Law and charitable organizations. Poor Law operatives in London were to be oriented toward a new goal: eliminating the implied “right to relief” that enabled “disorganised charity” by reinterpreting charity instead as “benevolent alms [which] could in no case be claimed as a right” (Goschen, 1971, pp. 227–228). The London Society for Organising Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendicity (e.g., the London Charity Organization Society; hereafter COS) was born from this document.

The positioning of the COS in the discourse is made perfectly explicit in the opening lines of its constitution: the purpose of the society is “the reform of charitable administration generally, and methods of promoting thrift and self-



dependence.” Broadly focused, the techniques included “collecting information” about charities, “making inquiries” into charitable claims and institutions, “investigating” those individuals appealing to charity, and most importantly, “suppressing ... improper or *mala fide* claims on the charity of the benevolent” (COS, 1869, pp. 3–4). The COS established a division of labor with the Poor Law, setting up district offices next to Poor Law Unions (workhouses) and working in tandem to fight the tide of “disorganised charity.” The COS would examine the merits of a case, using observation and interviews, sometimes sending visitors to homes. They pioneered early practices of social work, all in the effort to maintain self-dependence in spite of the availability of charity. The information gathered would be given to a district committee who used it to judge the “deservingness” of a case, determining whether an applicant should be given “benevolent” charitable aid or whether their appeal granted them only “indoor relief” and required entry into a workhouse (Mowat, 1961).

The COS would claim a “*scientific* renaissance” on its own behalf in instituting these measures, based largely on their elimination of a “right to relief.” Rather than the “isolated charity [of] medieval times” that operated according to the “spirit of medieval self-sacrifice, with the same disregard of its action due to the same indifference to the real causes of distress,” the “scientific method” in charity refuses “[to sap] independence and thrift and family affection... Organization starts an office, installs an Agent, calls a Committee, and after searching enquires, communicates sound, if not saving decisions” (COS, 1887, pp. 6–7). Even despite its “science,” the COS still promised to “promote intercourse between the poor and their helpers, so that those who would love the poor would know them also.” Indeed, it did this better than the medieval techniques of “isolated, disorganised charity.” Octavia Hill, the most famous of the COS visitors, justified the investigatory/casework approach of the COS for its ability to generate “sympathetic” relationships that served as a conduit for “[testing] the sincerity of a man or a nation” and teaching lessons “living very nobly” (Hill, 1877, p. 17).

Thus, the COS’s role in the archive was marked by a forced marriage between charity and self-dependence. The COS acknowledged the possibility of “compulsory idleness” while still attempting to enforce the moral worth of the poor as rational, reasonable and self-controlled—applying the transformative discipline of the Poor Law workhouse if necessary. On this interpretation, charity consisted of “benevolence” meant to affirm “sympathetic relationships” between elites and “the honest labouring class” fallen on hard times. It did not consist of “public charity” that “indiscriminately” responded to crises with a “disorganised” outpouring. The COS essentially tasked itself with fitting the right practices to the right classifications in order to maintain the logic of self-dependence and its binary of independence/dependence.

However, contradictions plagued even the most diligent of these efforts with a kind of immanent instability. An “event” on par with the Lancashire Famine



was unnecessary for transformation this time. By the early 1880s, the contradictions became irresolvable, inviting new constructions. Two case histories reveal the problems of the COS during this period and entry into the next stage. Both involve figures who would play critical roles in the next iteration of the discourse: Samuel Barnett and Beatrice Webb (*nee* Potter).

The son of a wealthy bedframe manufacturer, Barnett was among the first to become involved with the COS, joining the organization in 1869. With Octavia Hill, he began a movement for charity reform in St. Jude's parish, located in the heart of the poverty-stricken East End of London, where he was both Vicar in the Church of England and a member of the Poor Law Board. His involvement with the COS in the 1870s reveals a close identification with its principles. In 1874 he would proclaim, "The relief of the poor is a matter which I hold to be of the greatest importance. Indiscriminate charity is among the curses of London. To put the result of our observation in the strongest form, I would say that 'the poor starve because of the alms they receive'" (Barnett, 1919a, b, I, p. 83). The next year he argued that poverty stemmed from the conviction among the poor that they had a "right to food without work." "Disorganised charity" inflicted a loss on those receiving relief: "a kind gift makes paupers [because it] weakens in the recipient the power of doing his duty" (Barnett, 1875, pp. 56–57).

And yet, during the winter of 1880–1881, audible tremors started to appear, disturbing Barnett's worldview:

The severe winter tests our system of relief. For the first time, during the last eight years, we had to deal with applicants in need of immediate help. The question was, should we give the help, or should we think first of the self-respect it has been our aim to cherish? (Barnett, 1919b, II, p. 231).

"The principles," as Henrietta Barnett referred to them, "made life very difficult" for all COS workers in the East End at this time (230). In the midst of further troubles in 1883, it seemed to her husband that the

question of poor relief is rushing for solution ... Before this question is solved, a demand may arise for means to prevent the loss of life which, in East London, is yearly greater than on any battle-field, and the answer to that demand may unsettle much that is thought to be fixed (233).

The uncertainty continued to mount as the characteristics of the poor appeared (to Barnett) to change during the early 1880s.

Beatrice Potter, meanwhile, joined the COS after a comfortable, sheltered childhood as the daughter of a prominent railway entrepreneur. Herbert Spencer was a family friend, and he and Potter were particularly close. Indeed, it was from Spencer that she became interested in "human studies." It was the possibility of developing a true "social science" that served as her primary



motivation for joining the COS in the early 1880s (Webb, 1982, p. 83). Initially, Potter found the COS perspective conducive, lauding praise on Octavia Hill and emphasizing “sympathy” as the means to surmount the “impassable barrier” of human nature and “acquire knowledge” using the COS’s “scientific” method (76).

Yet as Potter became more versed in the COS technique, her dissatisfaction grew. There was a sense, she argued, that the work of the COS meant there was “*less harm done*” to the poor than otherwise. However, for lack of any “general considerations,” COS workers had few resources for judging “deservingness” when they came “face to face with individual misery.” The problem, Potter decided, was that the COS took no account of the “effect on society” when deciding the merits of a case. As a result, it seemed “*distinctly advantageous to us to go amongst the poor,*” but she had no confidence that it actually helped the poor (1982, p. 85; emphasis original).

Soon thereafter, Potter (Webb, 1982, p. 86) questioned herself about a man who had lost his job, “took to opium eating [and was] now unfit to work,” despite having a wife and three young children:

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?

Viewed this way, his problems could or could not be his own responsibility—the situation could pass either test that would reveal this. The case affirmed in stark terms that the COS was incapable of demonstrating the man’s “deservingness” according to the discourse of self-dependence, meaning that Potter could not herself stage a relationship of “sympathy” to this man in a way that successfully fused with background meanings of elite benevolence rooted in charity. The episode solidified Potter’s break with the COS. More than that it revealed fault lines on which the discourse would split in the 1880s and 1890s.

Progress and Poverty

In no better place is the movement away from charity revealed than in the American Henry George’s book *Progress and Poverty* (1879). George would give a popular lecture tour in England in the early 1880s on the basis of the book. Attended by many of those who formed the carrier group for the next iteration of discourse (including Barnett and Potter), the lectures resonated deeply. The following remark from George suggests why:

Our primary social adjustment is a denial of justice.... It is this that turns the blessings of material progress into a curse.... It is something grander



than Benevolence, something more August than Charity—it is Justice herself that demands of us to right this wrong. Justice that will not be denied; that cannot be put off—Justice that with the scales carries the sword (George, 1879, pp. 493–494).

If the (future) social reformers and radicals and (former) COS supporters in attendance at George’s lectures were not aware of the contradictory discourse inherited from Malthus and the COS, then George’s emphatic statement awakened them to it. While the relation of justice to the poor and the “laboring class” preceded George (in particular, by the Chartist Movement [see Marx, 1852(1971)]), he gave it new expression and urgency by opposing justice to charity and linking the former to “the blessings of material progress.”

The translation of this message into the Victorian discourse is evident in Arnold Toynbee’s statement of 1883:

We—the middle classes, I mean, not merely the very rich—we have neglected you; instead of justice we have offered you charity; and instead of sympathy, we have offered you hard and unreal advice; but I think we are changing. If you would only believe it and trust us, I think that many of us would spend our lives in your service. You have—I say it clearly and advisedly—you have to forgive us, for we have wronged you; we have sinned against you grievously—not knowingly always, but still we have sinned, and let us confess it; but if you will forgive us or not—we will serve you, we will devote our lives to your service, and we cannot do more (Toynbee, 1883, p. 54).

Toynbee also opposes justice to charity, yet evident here is a statement of *obligation* between “the middle classes,” the “very rich” and “the poor/the labouring class.” That obligation is stated differently than in the discourse on the poor and its emphasis on dependence. When Toynbee mentions “sin” and “neglect,” he refers to a failure of obligation—the upper and middle classes have “wronged” the poor by giving them “hard and unreal advice”—but one which is premised on self-dependence and moral equality. The “hard and unreal advice” offered the poor by the COS and the Poor Law is an unjust form of treatment. Hence, “service” enters the discourse not as an expression of *noblesse oblige* but as a moral duty in recompense to equals. The “sin” committed by the middle and upper class is the violation of a moral standard, now treated as *universal*.

Universality was always immanent in the discourse to the extent that the original problematization of poverty was based on the imposition of civil motives (reasonability, rationality, self-control) to the poor. What transpires in the late-Victorian period is not a break with the prior discourse in this sense,

but instead designates a different manifestation of its immanent logic. Importantly, that logic becomes articulated, at this stage, to an independent “civil sphere.”

For Toynbee to make the statements above depends on his recognition of some type of equal membership with the poor and the labouring class. “Equality” becomes a signifying term in this latter period. Yet it couldn’t have been had the “disembedded market” (e.g., differentiated economic sphere) been the sole foundation for the social relations that Toynbee draws attention to. Hitherto the economic sphere had been the venue for the performance of civil motives, tested and enforced through the apparatus of the Poor Law. No longer would it be. As Beatrice Webb (1926, p. 149) later recalled, the two main preoccupations of social reformers (like her) during the late-Victorian period were “on the one hand, the meaning of the poverty of masses of men; and, on the other, the practicability and desirability of political and industrial *democracy* as a set-off to, perhaps as a means of redressing, the grievances of the majority of the people.” Intimated in this statement is some type of relationship between two contrastive spheres: an economic sphere (source of majority “grievances” like poverty) and a civil sphere (“democracy”).

There are two ways in which this becomes evident in statements drawn from the period, both involving a second binary—responsibility/helplessness—structuring the discursive field. First, statements appear claiming that “the poor” could, in certain circumstances, be helpless for their economic situation, and that this was unjust for reasons of equality. Second, statements appear claiming that “the wealthy” or “the middle class” might be helpless for their economic situation, and that this was *also* unjust for reasons of equality. Both sets of statements are premised on “dual membership” of rich and poor in an economic sphere (source of economic standing) and a civil sphere (source of equality) with the potential for *contradiction* between them. Hence, in the late-Victorian discursive field, practices, classifications, new ethical subjectivities and statements were configured by both a independence/dependence binary and responsible/helpless binary, with the latter emphasizing civil motives (“responsible,” “active,” “autonomous”) tied to the contradictions of dual membership. This helped make the discourse universal at this stage, as it presented to the situation of *all* classes (classifications) the type of moral problematization once reserved only for the dependent poor (“paupers”).

The publication of the first volume of Charles Booth’s *Life and Labour of the People of London* in 1889 is indicative of this transformation. A data-gathering enterprise that departed from the COS’s “scientific method,” Booth’s book relied simply on the “facts as given ... with no bias, nor distorting aim, and with no forgone conclusion” (1889, p. 6). The positivist focus notwithstanding, the book was clearly phrased in terms directly resonant with a civil morality. Booth’s summary conclusion about poverty in East London is that a “great sense *helplessness*” pervades the situation: “the wage earners are helpless to regulate



their work and cannot obtain a fair equivalent for the labour they are willing to give; the manufacturer or dealer can only work within the limits of competition; the rich are helpless to relieve want without stimulating its sources" (1889, p. 6). Booth could have used "dependence," or "compulsory idleness" or the "mendacity" feared by the COS here instead of "helplessness." That he emphasizes the latter is revealing of the differences embedded in these statements.

For Booth, low wages and irregular work were the chief cause of poverty, not "loafing" (1889, p. 147). While this resisted assumptions made by the backlash against charity and the COS, Booth's book was novel for how it used a representation of social class to understand the poverty-stricken East End. Ranging from class A ("vicious" "semi-criminal") at the bottom to class H ("wealthy") at the top, Booth classified and mapped the denizens of East London in systematic form. This yielded by his own estimation his most important finding: that class B ("the very poor") acted as a drag on the classes above it, driving wages down and pulling classes C and D ("the poor") below the "poverty line." Put simply, as he concluded, "poverty drags down industry" (1889, p. 170).

"Helplessness" epitomizes a situation like this one, in which "the 'common lot of humanity,' even though not much amiss in itself, is cursed by insecurity against which it is not easy for any prudence to guard" (Booth, 1889, p. 161). "The poor" in this case were helpless to stop a process that operated through "the very poor"—who were also helpless to stop it. The difference between "helplessness" and "compulsory idleness" can be summarized here as "social structure." For Booth, individuals in classes A and B were not to be "confounded with criminals or paupers" but were rather "the material from which paupers are made" (1889, p. 596). Class B and its dragging effect constituted a "quagmire [of] the social structure" requiring that "class B [be brought] under state regulation." The impersonality of his solution is revealing in comparison with what came before: the task now was to address a *location* in social structure independently of the people found there.

Booth's analysis of East London thus contains the key to understanding the late-Victorian stage of the archive. The problematic now becomes maintaining the possibility of *responsibility* ("activity," "autonomy") despite the "helplessness" ("passive," "controlled") of "social structure." Importantly, this does not simply affect or implicate "the poor" or "the very poor." Helplessness presents a universal challenge, inclusive of all classes ("the wealthy," "the middle classes," "the labouring class"), as it forbids the exercise of civil motives in relation to one's economic position. Instead of poverty, or a dependent poor, or the compulsory idle, or the "mendacious" mendicants of benevolent charity, the object of discourse (the form of "being" that is problematized) switches to "social inequality." While the phrase itself is rarely found in statements drawn

from the period, the relative positioning of “classes” becomes the principal topic of moral concern at this stage (see Briggs, 1967). Why? The argument here is that a civil sphere in “dualistic” relation to an economic sphere implicates the moral worth of all classes, forcing a justification of economic position using civil criteria based on equality. This is the recipe for a statement like “the social value of competition is measured by its equality” (Booth, 1889, p. 366).¹¹

Consider, in brief, three phrases drawn from the archive, all situated within this new problematic and each an articulation of equality: service, equality of reward, and equality of opportunity.

Service This was the centerpiece of the discourse drawn around the Settlement Movement that Samuel Barnett and his wife Henrietta began in the winter of 1884 by founding Toynbee Hall in East London. Offering a schedule of cultural activities and benefits to the poor, the goal was to establish a permanent institution (a Settlement House) of educated and wealthy residents to live among the poor and facilitate a “regular interchange between the classes” (Meacham, 1987). This new focus is given expression in a lecture by Henrietta Barnett with the suggestive title: “What has the Charity Organisation Society to do with social reform?” (Barnett, 1888a). She starts her critique with the following hypothetical:

Is it possible that certain cases might require no relief which the COS can give—the relief which comes through books and patience-preaching pictures, the relief which follows the introduction to singing class leading the choir, or which comes through the hand-grasp of the wiser friend when the road is unusually drear? (1888a, p. 168).

On this grander view, charity should be “organized to remove some of the social conditions which stand as barriers to prevent [people from living] the highest, fullest, richest life” (168). This leads to the further insight that “charity should help both rich and poor... there are hindering barriers to the rich man’s life as well.” Charity is transformed into “service,” or a practice that reduces the helplessness implicit to differences in social position by serving as a “bridge that one set of condition-hindered people can cross to reach the other set of condition-hindered people” (168–169).

¹¹ While Booth doesn’t explicitly use the term “social inequality,” his several references to “equality” are indicative of this kind of integration between economic and civil. They usually reflect on a process of social structure that determines outcomes and judges whether this preserves individual “responsibility.” Compare this to W.H. Mallock’s early 1880s study of *Social Equality* where “social inequality” is either a measure of “character” or functions as a “motive to men who [desire] to rise” (1882, p. 189).



On this basis, Barnett recounts the following experience:

which of us, having once seen a Whitechapel alley at five o'clock on an August afternoon, and realizing all it means, besides physical discomfort, could go and enjoy our afternoon tea, daintily spread on the shady lawn, and not ask himself difficult questions about his own responsibility—while one man has so much and another so little? (1888a, p. 169).

This is an ethical paradox concerning the moral worth of the poor, highlighted by what Barnett treats as conditions of stark inequality. Absent charity in the traditional (COS) sense, the question becomes: What can elites do to improve the conditions of these people? The answer must lead to a “larger policy or a more embracing area of work,” one which does not neglect “the far-away issue ... the life of man raised to its perfect fullness” made possible through exposure to “culture” (171–172). As Samuel Barnett, continued: “the life of the thrifty is a sad life” (1888b, p. 98). Indeed, it is

the saddest monument ... ‘the respectable working man,’ who has been erected in honour of thrift. His brains, which might have shown the world how to save men, have been spent in saving pennies; his life, which might have been happy and full, has been dulled and saddened by taking ‘thought for tomorrow’ (1888c, pp. 242–243).

By contrast, “the best gifts of this age have fallen only to the rich” (1888b, p. 95). The metaphor “fallen” here is important, as it implies the absence of a civil motive among the rich. Through no responsibility of their own, the rich have inherited the “best gifts of the age.” Their helplessness thus obligates them to reassert their responsibility and exercise civil motives through the practice of service. Samuel Barnett summarizes this in the following, very structural imagery in which the purpose of the “high” is to benefit the “low”:

Mountains and valleys ... [and] hills that lend their beauty to the dales—their torrents fertilize the low-lying lands, and the loft mountain crag which first gains the light, and is the last to lingeringly let it go, gives back its reflected glory to gladden the shadowed valley (Barnett, 1888a, p. 172).

As Henrietta and Samuel Barnett conclude, this ethic of *service* assumes certain “truths with which we have become familiar ... [namely] the *equal capacity of all to enjoy the best*” (Barnett and Barnett 1888: v).

Equality of reward This phrase was crucial to the Fabian Society’s discourse in the late-Victorian period. Politically, the society was dedicated to gradualism and “permeation” as strategies for socialism. And yet they develop the discourse in a unique way. Drawing on the concept of “rent” from Ricardian economics

(Ricci, 1969), Sidney Webb (a leading figure in the Fabian Society) introduces a different notion:

‘Rent of ability’ is the special ability or energy with which some persons are born [that] is an ‘unearned increment’ due to the influence of the struggle for existence upon their ancestors, and consequently having been produced by Society, is as much due to Society as the ‘unearned increment’ of rent (Webb, 1882, pp. 25–26).

Ability here creates social inequality, yet the unequal benefits that accrue to those who have ability is “unearned” in the same way that rents on land are “unearned” because (in the same manner) abilities possessed individually are created *collectively*. In this sense, individuals are helpless whether they possess ability or not:

If my labor today sells for more than that of the bricklayer, is it due to thee alone, or to the growing pressure of the population in the past, of which thou art the fortunate exceptional outcome? To produce that outcome, hundred less fortunate, have succumbed in the struggle, contributing their mite to the future glory of the world, not by their lives but in their deaths, whereby the way is left clear for the more fit. Nay, perchance the very bricklayer today is the descendant of the man thy ancestor robbed or left to starve, and thy advantages would have been his, but for that selfish stroke. Let us constantly recognize the share in the work of the world done by those who *fail* in life’s battle, both by their efforts and by their very failure (Webb, 1884–1885, pp. 30–31; emphasis original).

As this suggests, “unearned benefits” should extend to those who “fail” because they are responsible for the “ability” possessed by those who succeed. The evolutionary schema applied here reinforces the sense that civil motives are not reflected in social inequalities. Hence, recompensing the unearned “rent of ability” provides “the ethical justification of that *equality of reward* ... which alone satisfies the demands of justice” (Webb, 1884–1885, p. 31).

The Fabian advocacy of a “National Minimum” is a later articulation of the same idea. The purpose here was to enforce “common rules” and guarantee basic material support “below which the individual, whether he likes it or not, cannot, in the interests of the well-being of the whole, ever be allowed to fall” (Webb and Webb, 1911: 8; Webb and Webb, 1897, pp. 671–688). Even as a technical solution to problems like Booth’s “poverty drags down industry,” the National Minimum surely counts as a statement shaped by the discursive field. If providing this minimum involved an “expropriation” of wealth from the rich (Webb, 1895, p. 43), this was completely warranted: that wealth accrued through an “accident of birth” and marks its possessor as “helpless” in its



accumulation (Townsend, 1911, p. 17). The notion of “accident” extends still further into the discourse: it was against accidents that the National Minimum intended to protect. As evidenced by what the Webbs called “Industrial Democracy,” the purpose was to overcome “accidents of birth,” “accidents of industry,” and those “accidents of commerce” that impoverished the many while granting “prodigious” wealth to the “irresponsible few” (Shaw, 1896).

Equality of opportunity The appearance of this phrase indicates a similar inflection by the problem of helplessness and its relation to social inequality. The economist, foreign correspondent and critic of empire John Hobson reveals the conditions for that appearance. Not surprisingly, the starting point is a critique of charity. Hobson opens an argument against the COS by asking “Why do the [COS] constantly denounce small gifts to the poor and hold their peace about large gifts to the rich?” (1909, p. 196).

The COS is all fear lest the poor should suffer from the degradation and the ignominy of receiving something they have not earned. Yet they never lift their voice to save the characters of the well-to-do which are constantly assailed from the same demoralizing forces (197).

The “shared demoralization” represented by windfall profits and “disorganised charity” alike challenges the nature of the civil motives hitherto defining moral worth. Charity here becomes

a feeble sort of conscience money ... an irregular and inadequate return of fragments of unearned income to those who have earned it ... yet who still cannot [order] their lives in decency and reasonable care because they receive it from processes of economic bargain where the poor are taken at a disadvantage (197–198).

The lack of responsibility among the wealthy is particularly evident in this statement. To become rich through “processes of economic bargain” that create disadvantage is to helplessly benefit from an unfair process. Charity becomes “conscience money” in this scenario for those who cannot exercise civil motives (“decency and reasonable care”) in their economic lives. And yet the “market system” should not, ideally, lead to these outcomes (see Freedman, 1976, p. 221).

In one sense, Hobson (1902) develops this stance in opposition to the British Empire and those who benefited from it, formulating theories of “underconsumption” that made the excesses of empire a primary cause of mass poverty in the metropole. Historians often refer to the beneficiaries of empire as “gentlemanly capitalists” (like Cecil Rhodes) and they dominated the City of London economy in the decades prior to 1914 (Cain and Hopkins, 1987). For Hobson, this group became the object of moral critique, personifying the pitfalls of unjust accumulation and unfair bargains. Most importantly, imperialism was

not a “blind inevitable destiny” from this perspective but found its source in “the inequality of industrial *opportunities* by which a favored class accumulates superfluous elements of income” (Hobson, 1902, p. 361).

As a counterpoint, then, to both the COS and the gentlemanly capitalists, Hobson offers “*equality of opportunity* which shall rightly adjust effort to satisfaction” (Hobson, 1909, p. 216; emphasis mine). Equality of opportunity allows “effort” to become the measure of worth, thus retaining responsibility by doubly emphasizing a civil motive. As an extreme opposite of helplessness, “effort” lends legitimacy and justice to social inequalities by affirming morally admissible acts of responsibility, autonomy, and activity. Hobson credits equality of opportunity with creating the ideal “division of labor [that] puts the right man or right woman in the right place” (1902, pp. 165–166). This allows the “social distribution” to be the “expression of the moral force of the community, the ‘general will’ finding embodiment in some stable and serviceable form of social support” (Hobson, 1909[1896], p. 217).

Discussion

The argument so far has concentrated on the appearance of “dual membership” during the late-Victorian period, with rich and poor alike, indeed *all* social classes, a part of both civil and economic spheres. In one respect, this begs the question of how the civil sphere became instantiated during this period, in a more institutional sense. That democracy had a growing presence at this time is evidenced by the 1884 Reform Act which granted suffrage to a significant segment of working class males. This triggered a reformation of the political field during the late-Victorian period, leading to the triumph of the Liberal Party over the Conservatives and ultimately to its replacement by the new Labour Party (Hanagan, 1997). While this suggests the institutional presence of the civil sphere during the late-Victorian period, civil discourse allowed for the lasting presence of these institutions when equality became the focal point of the late-Victorian discursive field (see Kivisto and Sciortino, 2015, p. 18).

By emphasizing “equality” in some form, participants in the discursive field recognized a “duality” of sorts not only about the poor but about *themselves*, that is, about the economic standing of “the middle class” and “the wealthy” and its potential incompatibility with civil motives and a “responsible” (autonomous, active) subjectivity. This is evident as early as Toynbee’s (1883) lecture. As noted above, the task of retrieving details from each of these three stages of the archive is to capture the discursive field as it appeared at this late, thickly symbolic stage, the one that seems to most closely resemble the discourse of today. The claim here is that an integral part of the field at this time was the experience of *duality*, or the problematization of economic positions (e.g., “the



wealthy,” “the middle classes,” “the labouring class,” “the poor”) as simultaneously civil and economic.

Importantly, this was a cultural construction made possible by the civil discourse, and not simply a response to institutional transformations or the “contentious” events occurring at the time (see Stedman Jones, 1971). While riots and demonstrations in London’s Trafalgar Square (in both 1886 and 1887) or labor strikes in the London Docks (in 1889), or the extremes and horrors of poverty and crime in the East End (to use just examples from London) played an important role, civil discourse, in particular the discursive field generated by the combination of civil binaries independence/dependence and responsible/helpless, served as the crucial precondition for generating the disquieting sense among the wealthy and the middle classes (those like the Barnetts, the Webbs and Hobson) that wealth and poverty could both be “undeserved” *qua* a violation of equality. This in turn made the material inequalities so readily apparent between classes becomes meaningful as forms of potential injustice.

One expression of this moral experience—for which social inequality is a highly potent symbolic object—is worth expanding upon. As Leela Gandhi (2007) and others (Yeo, 1977; Himmelfarb, 1991) have emphasized, the late-Victorian period was notable for the number of ethically rooted “socialisms” that appeared seemingly out of nowhere. Counting anti-imperialists, anti-capitalists, anti-vivisectionists, spiritualists, “arty-crafties,” vegetarians, zoophilicists, homosexuals, free love enthusiasts and a host of others among its ranks, these “utopians” did not splinter into a million different paths but instead expressed the same unifying *interest* in a social transformation they referred to collectively as “socialism” (Gandhi, 2007, p. 177).¹²

The source of that unifying interest can be located in the discursive field in the following sense. In the 1870s, if one were middle class or wealthy, joining the COS counted as an ethical act, a way of “conducting oneself morally... as an ethical subject” (Foucault, 1985, p. 26).¹³ In the late-Victorian period, by contrast, “ethical socialism” served as a different ethics for the same practices of self among the same kinds of people. Its implacable emphasis on “the Law of Equality” (as prominent ethical socialist Edward Carpenter put it) was altogether fitting for the moral experience of the time. Monitoring the subjectivity of “paupers” had once been the prerogative of the Poor Law and COS using a civil discourse. Now the relation to oneself as “middle class” or “wealthy” and also a civil subject created a motivation (“interest”) for the attainment of moral worth through a new ethics, now articulated to equality. Ethical (utopian) socialism thus served as a venue for fashioning a moral self in alignment with the discursive field that interpreted social inequality as social

¹² The “utopian” label was not formed from within these movements but attached to them in a subjugating move by Engels (1892) to distinguish his own branch of “scientific” socialism.

¹³ Recall the cases of Beatrice Webb and Samuel Barnett.



injustice. As a discursive practice in this sense, ethical socialism stands alongside statements like “service,” “equality of opportunity,” or “equality of reward” as distinctive to the period.

What transpires in the 1880s and 1890s, then, is the product of a long-term historical process that starts with the problematization of poverty in the early 19th century and its institutionalization through the New Poor Law. The discursive logic (independence/dependence binary) introduced subsequently collides with contingent events (the Cotton Famine in particular), leading to rearticulations. By the late-Victorian period “equality” is the principal focus of the discourse. Less a “break” with a prior formulation, however, this marks rather a further *rearticulation* of the same logic that had characterized the initial discursive practice that involved ascribing civil motives to the poor to enforce an ethical subjectivity.

Thus, taking all of the *classifications* (“pauper,” “the labouring class,” “the poor,” “the very poor,” “the middle classes,” “the wealthy,” etc.), *practices* (testing, confinement, discipline, charity, visiting, settlement, ethical socialism etc.), and *statements* (“the poor are responsible for their poverty,” “less eligibility,” “compulsory idleness,” “the poverty line,” “equality of opportunity,” “equality of reward,” “best the most common”) that appeared during this period into account, the Victorian archive becomes observable in its entirety. This panoramic view reveals just how much of what seems truly contemporary is retrievable from this historical site. The Victorian archive demonstrates why equality was neither an incidental part of this history nor a determinative effect exercised by “the liberal tradition” that erases any need for history. Instead, the discursive field that unfolded over this time is responsible for it, just as it is the (“social rights”) statements that seem to rigidly frame present-day debates about social inequality.

The archive shows that history in the *substantive* sense as the contingent sequencing of events (see Sewell, 2005, p. 83) plays an unmistakable role here, one that cannot be ignored. If the initial problematization of poverty in the New Poor Law hadn’t converged with the Lancashire Famine (a truly contingent event) to produce “charity organization,” then the late-Victorian turn toward equality wouldn’t have happened in the way that it did, as it was contingent on a reaction against the COS. Hence, just as much as this (colligated) history is situated in a pre-existing civil discourse, so too is that discourse situated in this history.

Conclusion

This article has made two principal arguments: first, that contemporary moral debates about social inequality in the American political field rely on a small range of statements that are *historical* in a constitutive respect. This means they



can be archived to a place and time that reveals the discursive “rules of practice” resulting from the way in which social inequality was put into discourse at that time. Hence, the statements about social inequality that appear (and reappear) with such regularity in the American political field are not natural, functionally inevitable, Platonically ideal (as Rawls seems to imply), or somehow generated *ex nihilo*. While liberalism is often targeted as the *de facto* archive for these statements, providing the “device” for speaking about social inequality, this is misleading. I’ve argued that the Victorian discursive field (as colligated history) is much more accurately and adequately attributed in that role, as it contains the transcendent conditions presupposed by the unreflexive use of these statements. Second, I’ve claimed that what that discursive field produced were “social rights” principles based on a civil discourse. This challenges the claim inherited from T.H. Marshall that for social rights to emerge “fundamental changes” to a preceding civil discourse first had to occur. On the contrary, I’ve argued that social rights are the further iteration of a line of civil discourse introduced nearly 80 years earlier (during the Malthusian prelude to the New Poor Law). That it took multiple forms over this period does not indicate fundamental change, but rather a manifold of civil discourse shaped in different ways by an eventful history.

The basic purpose of an archival analysis like this one is hermeneutic: it attempts to disclose “more about things than they are ... and articulate that ‘more’ in some new way” (Kompridis, 2006, p. 258). In Derrida’s (1996) figurative approach to the archive concept, psychoanalysis provides the model for what an archival analysis aspires to, as it makes clear how an engagement with the past reveals and articulates more than is available in the present. In postcolonial theory, the idea is similar. “The archive” also functions as a critical reformulation of the past that provides a new hermeneutic grasp of the present (Stoler, 2002). The archives created by imperial powers serve to contain and restrict the meanings and facts available from the past. This kind of arrangement therefore begs for the critical disclosures that will reconstruct those archives and revolutionize their lasting effect on the present.

Does the archival analysis in this article create similar possibilities? It shares the goal of reframing the present using a critical hermeneutic engagement with the past, but in an important respect liberalism doesn’t offer the kind of established conservative institution or suppressive unconscious the archival challenge to which would result in a critical reformation. The statements that are the staging point for this analysis are, in an important sense, *archiveless*. They are seemingly “without history” and so the hermeneutic reformulation stems mostly from simply *making them historical*. Nevertheless, the goal remains to disclose and articulate “more” about these all too familiar statements (“equality of opportunity,” “equality of reward/outcome,” “service,” “merit,” “effort,” “talent”) than appears in their common usage. The “more,” in this case, does not consist of suppressed memories or erased historical facts, but the



transcendent conditions (e.g., “rules of practice,” “the system that constitutes statements”) that are indispensable to these statements as statements *about* social inequality.¹⁴ The binaries of independence/dependence, responsibility/helplessness are revealed as a discursive field presupposed by their meaningful use. More generally, the presumption is that our contemporary experience of social inequality as a moral object always already takes places within a semiotic framework constructed and crafted in history.

The critical question is whether this framework is a “tradition” that we should accept and maintain, doubling down on what we’ve inherited from the past as fortunate to have it, or whether its hermeneutic disclosure in this sense invites a departure from the past and a fundamental change to the present, formally akin to the psychoanalytic and postcolonial use of the archive. My argument on this point follows Dewey: “disclosures of possibilities that contrast with actual conditions is the most penetrating criticism of the latter than can be made” (quoted in Kompridis, 2006, p. 254). To the degree that visiting the archive, in this sense, opens *possibilities* in the present, this article invites a change and not a preservation.

In this case, possibilities revealed in the *aboutness* of the common statements open a criticism of the present. These statements are about social inequality, as mentioned, but this is less interesting than the fact that they are also *about* civil solidarity between equals that contradicts the inequalities of the economic sphere (Alexander, 2013). As civil discourse, the “animating” background for claims about equality reveals that much “more” is potentially available in them. Because statements like equality of opportunity participate in this transcendent sphere, they open the possibility of challenging the discursive regime we’ve inherited and introducing the kind of discursive creativity of combining and recombining new civil ideas and oppositions witnessed at the end of the 19th century.

While these claims might seem alien to Marshall’s (1950) analysis of citizenship, they relate directly to one of his most important and timely claims. Marshall discusses “equality of opportunity” as an example of “citizenship [operating] as an instrument of social stratification” (1950, p. 67). At the time he was writing this, the clearest application of equality of opportunity was found in the British education system following the 1944 Butler Act, which reformed the system in order to “afford all pupils opportunities for education.” As Marshall argues, the Butler Act extended a social right and so was rightfully celebrated. More troubling, however, was that it introduced an insidious contradiction in which education served as arguably the best defense of the “equal right to be recognized as unequal” (1950, p. 66). Equality of opportunity

¹⁴ Taylor states the logic of a transcendental argument of this sort as follows: “They move from their starting points to their conclusions by showing that the condition stated in the conclusion is indispensable to the feature identified at the start” (1995, p. 27).



working through educational opportunity interacted with labor markets to provide a “stamp of legitimacy” for economic inequalities. This successfully maintained them despite its contradiction with the equal opportunity to education as a social right that ensures a guaranteed level of “welfare and security.” As Marshall (1950, p. 68) notes, such a glaring “discrepancy” can only be resolved through a “debate about social rights” and not a “bargain about economic value.”

In many ways, Marshall’s mid-century arguments have proven prophetic. Equality of opportunity via education has long been controversial for its supportive relationship to social inequality. This is true in Britain and especially so in the United States. Moreover, it seems the debate about this has become almost entirely characterized by a “bargain about economic value.” The only justifiable way to defend education is to translate it into economic benefit (see Labaree, 2008).

The question this poses is whether Marshall’s understanding of social rights is equipped to provide sufficient defense of education against this kind of contradictory use that works against social rights by promoting and fortifying social inequality. My argument in concluding is that Marshall *cannot* offer sufficient defense in this respect, and this is because of the shortfalls plaguing his more general claims (in “Citizenship and Social Class”) about the origin of social rights, which I’ve challenged in this article. Even if we suppose that “economic value” doesn’t overwhelm the debate, the concept of “social right,” as Marshall understands it, still lends itself with alarming ease to the use of education to vigorously promote the “equal right to be unequal” (above all), even as this grossly contradicts a social-democratic understanding of “welfare and security.” But suppose that, contrary to Marshall’s claims, equality of opportunity and the equal right to education cannot be understood independently of a civil discourse, the essential ingredient of which is the promotion of solidarity against the un-civil treatment of individuals by the economy? Marshall would still be right in his premonition about the contradictions of equality of opportunity. He would be wrong, however, in the reasons why.

In this case, equality of opportunity is corrupted not as the means to “welfare and security,” but as the means to solidarity extending across the un-civil differences of social class. This is a reframing drawn from within the archive that recovers a different meaning, one that is, as I’ve argued, always embedded in equality of opportunity as a moral statement about social inequality. Although it does not put a halt to the continued retrenchment of unequal class differences through the equal right to education, it does find more possibilities for fighting back against this corrupting influence than those narrowly confined to the present and its immediate disclosures.

Marshall himself serves as a cautionary tale in this regard. He could not have appreciated this recovered meaning in his own time, as he had already adapted his view to the interpretation placed on equality of opportunity (and social

inequality more generally) by the powerful interests threatened by educational opportunity. The archive, in this sense, serves as a means of self-defense. It does not have to have a conservative influence by concealing the past. Rather, its intervention forbids us from being victimized by the present.

Acknowledgements

The author specially thanks the *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* reviewers and Editor for their criticism and suggestions on earlier versions of this article, and also Becky Strand for her help with the title.

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