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Contextualising the Ripper murders: poverty, crime and unrest in the East End of London, 1888

On the 29th September 1888 *Punch* magazine published one of the most iconic images of the time, John Tenniel's 'Nemesis of Neglect'. The accompanying poem reads as follows:

*There floats a phantom of the slum's foul air,
Shaping to eyes which have the gift of seeing,
Into the spectre of that loathly lair
Face it – for vain is fleeing!
Red-handed, ruthless, furtive, unrect,
'tis murderous crime – the nemesis of neglect!*

The cartoon appeared on the eve of the discovery of the so-called 'double event': the murders of Elizabeth Stride in Dutfield's Yard, Berner Street and that of Katherine Eddowes in Mitre Square, across the borders of the City of London. The murders of Stride and Eddowes brought the Ripper's tally up to 4 (or 5 or 6 depending on which particular theory you subscribe to) and fuelled the growing wave of panic that was gripping the area. Both murder sites soon became popular destinations for murder tourists and in Mitre Square stalls were set up to sell them food and refreshments. What Tenniel's image suggests is that the Ripper was a manifestation in semi-human form of the area itself; a 'phantom' he says 'of the slum's foul air', a result of leaving Whitechapel to fester in its own filth and depravity. Indeed as John Marriott has written, this cartoon, along with several other observations and comments in the popular press, helped to reinforce the idea that Whitechapel and 'by extension, East London – was...a site of fear, loathing and moral desolation'¹ and as such it represented a very real threat to the entire fabric of late Victorian society and the Empire.

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What I would like to do in this paper today is take a broad look at some of the underlying reasons for this attitude towards the East End and consider to what extent they were justified. In doing so I intend to look at contemporary responses to poverty and poor housing through the views of social reformers; at local reactions to immigration and at the ways in which social unrest and protest was dealt with by the authorities and finally at the nature of crime in the East End. I will argue that all of these helped create an image of East London and its denizens that did little to help either the population of Whitechapel and the surrounding districts or indeed the victims of the Ripper. Those of you familiar with modern British popular culture will know that the East End has continued to be manipulated by media representations (and misrepresentations) which attempt to mythologise that part of London. What I hope to do this afternoon is look beyond the myth in an attempt to describe the reality of life in one of the poorest parts of Queen Victoria's empire.

As the Whitechapel murders unfolded the area was invaded by curious onlookers and ghoulish tourists, as well as newspaper reporters desperate for local colour and copy to fill their columns and steal a march on their rivals. However, the press found that the police became increasingly reluctant to talk to them as criticism of their efforts to catch the killer was coupled with wild suggestions as to the identity of culprit and even wilder recommendations of how he might be captured. One consequence of this was that the press and other social commentators turned their attention to the area itself. They peered into the dark unlit courts, mingled with the crowds, visited the soup kitchens and gawped at the strange foreign faces on Middlesex Street and Brick Lane. What they saw alarmed them and there were calls for something to be done. That great socialist thinker, George Bernhard Shaw even suggested that the Whitechapel murders had had an unexpected and beneficial side-effect in highlighting the social problems of East London. Writing to the *Star* newspaper Shaw commented that:

*Private enterprise has succeeded where Socialism failed. Whilst we conventional Social Democrats were wasting our time on education, agitation, and organisation, some independent genius has taken the matter in hand, and by simply murdering and disembowelling four women, converted the proprietary press to an inept sort of communism.*ⁱⁱ

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However it would be wrong to suggest that the problems of Whitechapel and its environs were somehow ‘discovered’ in the autumn of 1888; social reformers, radicals, investigative journalists and upper-class ‘slummers’ had been mooching around the East End for decades. Some, like Canon Barnett had set up home there, intent on living amongst the people they most wanted to help. Toynbee Hall had been established so that the sons of the wealthy could live cheek-by-jowl with the poor of the slums in the belief that their example in manners, education and Christian morals would rub off on the children of East End. Other well-to-do and earnest Christian reformers saw the East End as a battleground in the fight for morality and decency. As early as the 1790s Patrick Colquhoun had identified the docklands of the capital as the heart of ‘a variety of *evils* of great magnitude’ and he called for the creation of a professional police force to combat what he described as a ‘melancholy picture of general depravity’. A prominent member of the London Missionary Society – more used to saving souls in Calcutta - was shocked to discover in 1866 that the situation was much worse in East London than it was in India: here he alleged, ‘they reach the very horrors of immorality’.ⁱⁱⁱ A few years earlier the writer John Hollingshead had deplored the state of Fryingpan Alley in Spitalfields (now incidentally full of bijou shops and fancy eateries) where the ‘rooms are dustbins – everything but dwelling places’^{iv}. James Greenwood, well known as the author of the *Seven Curses of London*, described the terrible conditions in a workhouse casual ward. His article was published in the *Pall*

Mall Gazette to great consternation and gnashing of teeth. Questions were asked in parliament and demands were made for reforms to the Poor Law and the housing of the poor.

Thus from the end of the Crimean War onwards concerns about the East End – and indeed poverty and poor housing more generally – were continually in the public eye. The East End suffered extremely badly from the economic downturn in the 1860s. A banking crisis (there’s nothing new in history folks!) was followed by the virtual collapse of the shipbuilding industry in the East End docks. Silk weaving suffered after 1860 as the French undercut English goods; the London docks lost their monopoly on foreign trade. In the 10 years between 1877-87 ‘tonnages unloaded in all the London docks fell from 2,171,732 to 1,598,146’ and more and more Dockers found themselves either unemployed or reduced to casual labouring.^v One consequence of this was the concentration of more labour in the workshops of Spitalfields and Whitechapel. Men and women worked in cramped conditions making clothes or matches for long hours for little pay. The so-called sweated trades were also the subject of parliamentary investigation and widespread condemnation even if much of the criticism was unfairly laid at the feet of the immigrant Jewish community (a subject which I will return to shortly).

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The social problems of the East End were brought into sharp focus in the years before the Ripper murders by the works of two influential writers. George Sims and Andrew Mearns both published sensational accounts of life amongst London’s poorest inhabitants. In *How the Poor Live* (1889) Sims warned of the dangers that the neglect of the plight of East London posed for Victorian society. He drew parallels with the Paris Commune of 1871 and alerted his readership that a

Mighty mob of famished, diseased, and filthy helots is getting dangerous, physically, morally, politically dangerous. The barriers that have kept it back are rotten and giving way, and it may well do the State a mischief if it be not looked to in time.^{vi}

Mearns’ pamphlet was entitled *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* and in it he argued that civilization itself was under threat because at the heart of London and other British cities lay ‘a vast mass of moral corruption, of heart-breaking misery, and absolute godlessness’.^{vii} Mearns made some wild accusations about conditions in the homes of the poor of Bermondsey, Ratcliff and Shadwell including a suggestion that incest was common and prostitution almost a necessity.

Despite the exaggerations there was some truth behind these stark descriptions of East End poverty: thousands lived in extremely cramped lodgings, where a whole family might occupy one room with little or no sanitation. Others dwelt in cellars like troglodytes, while many flitted between lodging house beds with nowhere to call home. The American writer Jack London left a memorable

recollection of his time in the capital investigating the low dives and squalid kitchens of the poorest. The lodging houses he visited contained all sorts of inhabitants brought low by unemployment, drink and personal tragedy. As another visitor, Howard Goldsmid observed, the Beehive lodging house on Brick Lane was home to many who had ‘seen better days’. Here were

respectable artisans whom the waves of trade-depression have overtaken and submerged..small shopkeepers ruined by the poverty of working folk among whom their business lay [and] even professional men are now and then to be found among the motley crowd in a kip-house kitchen.^{viii}

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Finally, and in an attempt at a more scientific analysis of the social problems of the age, Charles Booth undertook a detailed survey of poverty between 1889 and 1902. Booth sent a team of investigators on a fact-finding mission across the capital (starting in the East) to knock doors and ask questions about occupation, income and family expenses. Having collated and analysed his data Booth then graded each street, court and avenue by its economic status and allocated it a colour: black for the worst areas, gold for the richest. Booth’s poverty maps offer us a fascinating window into the distribution of wealth in Victorian London and demonstrate that poverty and privilege were often closer than one might think. However, while it is not the poorest area of London (that being Southwark, south of the river) Spitalfields and Whitechapel have a large concentration of streets coloured black and blue (to indicate semi-criminal and poverty stricken households). There is little or no gold glistening on the maps of the East End. Indeed Booth, who set out to disprove the socialist claims that twenty-five per cent of Londoners were living in poverty, was shocked to discover that things were actually worse (the figure was more like 35%). One of the most difficult things for late Victorians to digest was the reality that at the centre of the most glorious empire the world had ever know were some of most impoverished and degraded people on the planet.

And of course what worried many of them was not that their fellow human beings were so far removed from the trappings of wealth and luxury; after all Victorian capitalism was a triumph of helping oneself (as embodied by the mantra espoused by Samuel Smiles). No, what concerned growing numbers of the upper and middle class was a fear that the lower orders would reject their lowly position in the pecking order and overthrow their social betters. And by the time Tenniel’s *Nemesis of Neglect* appeared in print the timorous elites had already had a taste of what might be in store.

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As William Fishman has noted 1886 'had been a terrible year for labour'^{ix}. Britain was experiencing what some have termed a depression but was certainly a recession and as in all slumps it hit the poorest hardest. Wages fell, jobs disappeared and a new word was coined: 'unemployment'. This was coupled with a severe winter which forced up the prices of the most basic commodities – food, fuel and shelter. On February 6th 1886 some of the unemployed had gathered in Trafalgar Square to ask for bread and listen to speeches by the socialist Henry Hyndman the well-heeled leader of the Social Democratic Federation. Poor police planning and even worse communication meant that as part of a crowd of 'roughs' set off for the posh shops and gentlemen's clubs on Pall Mall police reinforcements were directed to the Mall to protect the royal personage and chaos ensued.

While there was widespread condemnation of the West End riots in parliament and the press there were also attempts to alleviate some of the poverty that was thought to have occasioned them. But like many of the actions taken to address concerns about poor housing and unemployment these involved fund raising on a relatively small scale rather than constructive redistribution of wealth and access to work: in short the government and City bodies such as the Mansion House Fund offered mere palliatives when serious surgery was required. In 1887 things were no better for the poor and destitute and many of them started sleeping rough under the gaze of Nelson and Landseer's Lions.

Not unexpectedly this resulted in angry letters to the newspapers and calls for the police to clear the square. While at least one London bobby showed initiative (by dowsing the square's benches with cold water to make any loafers less comfortable) the acting superintendent of the Metropolitan force felt that any concerted attempt to remove people would merely provoke a negative reaction against the police. After all he noted, the 'great majority of them are quite distinct from the rough and give no cause for Police interference'. His views were not shared by his boss, the recently appointed Sir Charles Warren who scribbled in the margin of the report that 'I am disposed to think that locating them in TS [Trafalgar Square] ...will give us trouble'^x. In fact it was to be Warren's hard line and unbending attitude towards policing the streets of the capital that was to bring trouble in the months ahead.

1887 was supposed to be year of royal celebration – the Queen of England and empress of India had occupied the throne for 50 years, but it was the continued occupation of Trafalgar Square that was unnerving the authorities. A banner was unfurled by socialist protestors – 'We will have work or bread' it demanded. Warren sent his men in to clear the square on a regular basis and then took the drastic step of issuing a notice banning all future demonstrations. This was a clear attack on English liberties and freedom of speech and was immediately challenged by some sections of the press. *Reynolds'* asked 'are we in London or St. Petersburg?' drawing close parallels with the stifling of any popular protest in tsarist Russia. The ban was severely tested when the Metropolitan Radical Federation called a meeting in the square to protest the imprisonment of an Irish member of

parliament. On Sunday November 13th 1887 home rule demonstrators, socialists, members of the unemployed and curious sightseers converged on Trafalgar Square in open defiance of Warren's injunction. The Commissioner's response was immediate and heavy-handed. A police baton charge failed to disperse the protesters and while the nearby mounted Life Guards were not called in to help a battle raged between the police and public. There were over 200 casualties and at least one fatality. This was a public relations disaster for Warren and the Met and was a casual factor in their subsequent failure to get the press and public onside in the hunt for the Ripper. The editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, William Stead, took particular delight in ridiculing Police tactics at what became known as 'Bloody Sunday' and laid the blame firmly at Sir Charles' door.

'Bloody Sunday' and the West End Riots may have fuelled the sense of unease that pervaded the Victorian society in the 1880s but they did not really threaten the hegemony of the ruling class. Socialists could posture all they liked, but England was not ready for revolution. In some respects 'Bloody Sunday' was, as one historian has termed it, the 'last hurrah for the London mob' and political activists toned down their protests in the wake of the debacle. The threat of outcast London was less a call to arms and more a plea for help and thereafter socialists directed their efforts away from revolution and towards trade unionism and political reform.

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The response from the establishment and middle classes was also gradual and pragmatic but was not without some success. The late nineteenth century saw the early evolution of British social work. Inspired largely by the efforts of middle class women who were determined to break out of the domestic sphere that had been ordained for them, and who threw themselves into good works and campaigning against poverty, immorality and a host of other causes. Most prominent in the East End was Octavia Hill, whose Charity Organisation Society set up stall in the area and worked with the model dwelling movement that was active in building new homes to help the poor raise themselves out of the slum. Backed by philanthropists such as George Peabody new homes rose up throughout the capital, beginning in the East. These remarkable efforts at social housing were carefully designed to provide clean, well ventilated dwellings for the respectable poor. Communal laundries ensured the working classes had no excuses for keeping up appearances and the central courts gave their offspring an alternative to running wild about the streets. Octavia Hill and her army of earnest female COS members visited the homes of the poor and made sure they were clean, their children at school and their husbands were at work (and not the worse for drink). Most of all they checked they were not behind with their rent. Hill and C.S. Loch the chairman of the COS believed in self-help. They bitterly opposed the notion of indiscriminate giving, believing that it created dependency and embedded pauperism. This was the prevailing ideology of social reformers like Helen Dendy and her husband to be Bernard Bosanquet who appreciated that the poorer members of society needed help but feared that

those at the very bottom – the so-called residuum or underclass – were beyond redemption. For the Bosanquets the principle of individualism meant that society had a limited role in assisting people to rise out of poverty; individuals could be encouraged, educated and offered a path but ultimately it was up to them. However, non-revolutionary socialists – such as the Fabian Society – were already coming to a different conclusion. Beatrice Potter and her husband Sidney Webb began to argue that a collective response was required if the problems of society were to be addressed. The Webbs were instrumental in the creation of old age pensions in 1908, the first step towards the post-war Welfare State and recognition that British society had a duty of care towards those that sat at the bottom of the social order. All that was to come however.

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In the meantime as the echoes of the Trafalgar Square riots faded away the London unemployed returned to their haunts in the East and south of the river Thames. Within Whitechapel itself there were tensions a plenty for local people to concern themselves without the emergence of a serial killer to contend with. Earlier I touched on the problems caused by immigration from Eastern Central Europe and I think it is necessary to take a snapshot of the mixed communities of the East End in 1888 because it affected both police and public attitudes and reactions towards the murders.

In 1892 Israel Zangwill penned his evocative novel of life within the Jewish community of the East End. In *Children of the Ghetto* a whole host of characters struggle to survive amidst grinding poverty and local prejudice. Here we meet Esther Ansell, who queues for a jug of soup and two precious loaves of bread to feed her father and hungry siblings only to trip and smash the jug in her haste to reach home. Or there is Mr Kosminski, ‘to whom life meant work, and work meant money, and money meant savings’.^{xi} He was an immigrant from Poland who had struggled to make a living and now employed others in dress-making. Employers like Kosminski were denounced in parliament and the local socialist clubs as ‘sweaters’ – they were accused of paying subsistence wages and forcing workers to slave away day and night in cramped conditions. Both these characters illustrate the reality of life in the Jewish community of Spitalfields and Whitechapel.

It is hard to determine exactly how many Jews lived in the East End in the late 1880s. Charles Booth estimated the numbers at around 45,000 in 1887 but there may have been fewer.^{xii} The 1871 census had recorded just over 100,000 central European migrants in the whole of Britain and the *Jewish Chronicle* believed there were about 100,000 Jews in England in 1891. What is certain is that waves upon waves of poor non-English speaking foreigners had been arriving in the capital throughout the 1880s. The persecution of Jews living within the Russian Empire had forced tens of thousands (one estimate puts the figure as high as a quarter of a million) to leave their homes and families and make the long trek across Europe to England where many hoped to find a ship to take them to the Golden Medina – the ‘promised land’- America.

The reality was that they arrived with little more than the clothes they stood up in having spent any money they had saved on the journey over. Once they arrived in the capital they often fell prey to the chancers that met them at the docks with bogus offers of work, lodgings or tickets for the voyage to the United States, all designed to part them from what dregs of cash or jewellery they still possessed. If they negotiated this final hurdle they had little choice but to aim for the heart of the Jewish community in the East End where at least they would find people who spoke their language, practised their faith and where they might get food and shelter and work. For all the demonization of the ghetto in contemporary writing it is worth noting that immigrant communities had little option but to flock together. They needed to be close to their places of worship, to be around others that understood them culturally, they wanted to be able to buy food they were familiar with and that adhered to religious custom. They also needed to find work and it was only in the workshops of Jewish employers that these new immigrants could labour. An English employer could hardly afford to allow his Jewish workers to go home on Friday evening and take Saturdays off to observe their faith. But the presence of the ghetto created tensions within East London – tensions that manifested themselves during the Ripper panic and tensions that continued to blight the area well into the next century.

Spitalfields and Whitechapel have a long and continuing history of providing a temporary home for the dispossessed, the unwanted and the persecuted immigrant. In the late seventeenth century French Huguenots made a new home and established themselves in Spitalfields bringing their skills as silk weavers and leaving a lasting architectural and cultural mark on the area that is evident to this day when one strolls around Wilkes Street and Fournier Street in the shadow of Nicholas Hawksmoor's magnificent Christ's Church. The Huguenot community had so effectively integrated with the indigenous one by the 1880s that they felt the need to establish a Huguenot Society to preserve what remained of their cultural heritage. There was also a long established Jewish community in the area, well before the new immigrants arrived. London had been home to Portuguese Jews for centuries and as they were not allowed to reside in the City itself they set up home on the outskirts in Aldgate and Spitalfields and following Cromwell's acceptance of their petition to worship openly they built one of the oldest Synagogues in England on Bevis Marks (1701) which survives today, albeit surrounded by high rise office blocks. In the 1860s and 1870s a new wave of immigrants arrived from Germany and the Netherlands who gradually integrated with the local population.

But it was the dramatic influx of Polish and Lithuanian Jews that made such an impression on local people in the 1880s. The newcomers – 'greeners' as they were called – looked very different: as one correspondent in the PMG noted when watching a Jewish funeral procession, here were women

Shapeless figures encased in shabby furs and threadbare velveteens...the men were even stranger looking, clad in indescribable garments, from the tattered overcoat of a modern Fagin to the reach-me-down finery of the East-end exquisite

They spoke a different language, the women wore dyed black wigs, they supposedly didn't wash – all sorts of prejudices were brought to the surface by the sudden arrival of thousands of foreigners on the streets of the East End. As I have suggested much of this prejudice was unfair and misplaced. While the anti-alienist Arnold White tried to claim that the newcomers lacked morals and were taking local jobs (a view echoed by many – including some members of the well-established Jewish community) the reality was that nearly all the immigrants found homes and work within the ghetto for the reasons I suggested earlier. Those that didn't were helped by the Jewish community and did not tend to apply for assistance from the gentile ratepayers of the parish. The chair of the Whitechapel Board of Guardians rejected White's claim that poor Jews were living off the backs of English charity – hardly any Jews were admitted to the Whitechapel workhouse. The Jewish Board of Deputies provided money for food, for shelter and sometimes for travel to America or back East. Indeed they placed adverts in the German press in an attempt to persuade would be migrants not to come to the already crowded metropolis. Thus, for the most part at least, the local Jewish community looked after its own coreligionists.

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Of course the reality of the situation didn't prevent the latent anti-Semitism of the nineteenth century from rearing its ugly head from time to time. In 1887 the arrest of Israel Lipski for the murder of Miriam Angel again allowed those who wanted to fan the flames of prejudice ample licence to do so. The unfortunate Mrs Angel was poisoned – the culprit poured nitric acid down her throat – and Lipski (who lodged with Mrs Angel and her husband in Batty Street, Whitechapel) was found cowering under her bed. The supposed killer had apparently attempted his own life by taking some of the poison himself but had survived only to face the noose and the howls of public opprobrium. There was a suggestion that the 22 year-old Lipski had attempted a sexual encounter with his landlady but the real motive for the murder were never discovered. At his trial the clearly disturbed Lipski had to have a translator as he spoke little English. Indeed during the 1880s the local police discussed the idea of training some of their officers to speak Yiddish so concerned were they that they could not communicate with a large proportion of the local community. Israel Lipski was convicted and sentenced to death. The home secretary considered his case but ultimately left him to the mercy of the hangman. Lipski did confess before he was executed but here was a young man clearly suffering from some form of mental illness and there was a suggestion that two other Jews might have been responsible for Miriam's murder – therefore we shouldn't necessarily read his confession as a testament to his guilt. Lipski became a term of abuse for the immigrant Jew – famously hurled at one onlooker who may, or may not, have had a brief encounter with the Whitechapel murderer in Berner Street.

Anti-alienist tensions remained high throughout the 1880s because it was time of unemployment and poverty and the Ripper murders fuelled those tensions because many believed that no Englishman could have carried out such a brutal series of killings. In the years since the Whitechapel murders the suggestion that the killer was a foreign Jew has persevered. Sir Melville McNaughten's memorandum listed a 'Kosminski, poor Polish Jew' as the third of the three suspects the Police had supposedly considered. Despite the sterling efforts of historians Kosminski appears to have remained as elusive today as he was over a hundred years ago. There was a Jewish suspect at the time, a rather unpleasant character named John Pizer who was characterised as 'Leather Apron'. Pizer was an easy target, as were several of his fellow Jews, and his arrest was the spark for anti-Semitic demonstrations and vigilante attacks on local immigrants. When the infamous writing on the wall was discovered in Goulston Street following the 'double event' Sir Charles Warren was quick to order its removal lest it become a cause for a pogrom in the area. There is, so far as I can see, no evidence that the Ripper was a Jew but it is fairly obvious why this was suggested at the time and since. Anti-Semitism was rife in Europe in the late nineteenth century and while Jews in Britain may have suffered less than those in some other parts of the continent those in the East End were exposed more than most. Jews were later blamed for the war in South Africa, for the outbreak of war in 1914 and in the interwar period had to defend themselves against the racist Oswald Mosely and his Blackshirts in Cable Street.

Of course Whitechapel and the East End were not populated entirely by immigrant Jews. There were large numbers of Irish families as well as Italians, other Europeans and a small Chinese community in Limehouse. All of these were variously characterised as 'foreign', different and potentially dangerous. Even the visiting cowboys and Indians from the travelling Wild West show were considered as potential killers. It was, as I've said, much more comfortable to believe that a foreign devil was murdering prostitutes on English soil than to contemplate the idea that the murderer was a son of Albion itself. The area remains one that is home to a large immigrant community. When I take my students around the murder sites and other places of interest it is impossible not to notice the tremendous array of curry houses, sari shops and the dominant presence of the East London Mosque. Brick Lane has become 'Banglaland' and its Jewish heritage has almost entirely been swept away.

So far then I have discussed some of the very real problems of the East End in 1888. This was an area of London steeped in poverty, in poor housing and suffering badly in the midst of an economic depression. The visitations of members of the middle and upper classes – as missionaries and 'slummers' seeking cheap thrills and entertainment brought the spotlight of attention onto Whitechapel, Bethnal Green and Spitalfields and served to highlight its social problems. Commentators, social reformers and journalists filled reams of paper with their observations, suggestions and fears while cartoons such as the *Nemesis of Neglect* presented an image of the East End that pandered to well established concerns about the threat of revolution and social unrest. Waves of poor immigrants from the Russian Empire exacerbated tensions within the area and also added the

exotic but terrifying image of the bearded foreign anarchist to the mix. In short then the East End served as a crucible in which to place all the anxieties of late Victorian Britain.

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If we know anything about the Ripper murders we know that all the victims were prostitutes. I don't intend to discuss Victorian attitudes towards prostitution here – I would perhaps direct people to the work of Judith Walkowitz instead. But the fact that the East End was home to hundreds of women that regularly prostituted themselves for enough small change to feed their addiction to drink or to scrape together enough money to put a roof over their heads for the night should remind us of the chronic poverty of the district. All of the Ripper's victims were poor, all apparently alcoholics most had experienced broken marriages and had been in and out of a number of lodging houses or the workhouse. These were not career prostitutes; these women were selling their bodies to survive. The Ripper's victims were prostitutes of the lowest class and as campaigns to restrict or curtail the vice trade grew over the second half of the century it was women like these who were forced onto the streets. Campaigners targeted brothels – although the West End establishments frequented by the rich and powerful managed to escape the worst attentions of the police – as a result women like Mary Nichols, Annie Chapman, Liz Stride, Kate Eddowes and Marie Kelly were driven onto the streets and down the dark alleys of east London. As the murders unfolded in the press some organs chose to place the blame for the killings on the victims themselves. It was their own fall from grace, their degradation that led to their murder or their stupidity in placing themselves at the mercy of the killer. However, it's worth remembering that prostitution was (and is) a social problem but it's not about crime or criminality: it is a problem of economic and gender inequality and demonising the prostitute is unlikely to solve anything. I have often been struck by the fact that while there are countless books about the identity of an unknown killer there have been hardly any that have made more than a cursory attempt to understand the circumstances of his victims. This is, I think, in part because of the way in which the East End and its inhabitants have been characterised over the years.

In the nineteenth century the East End was synonymous with prostitution and crime. Contemporaries believed in the existence of a criminal class; a subsection of the working class – an underclass – the residuum – that had effectively rejected the protestant work ethic and had determined to live parasitically upon the rest of society. The middle classes read about the depredations of the criminal class in their daily and weekly newspapers. As they consumed their morning tea and toast a vision of a criminal population lurking in their midst was laid out for them by the army of eager journalists that infested the police courts of the capital. At the same time the emerging science of criminology offered explanations (some of which were frankly bizarre) for the criminal actions of individuals. So in this final section of the paper I would like to explore the nature of crime as reported in the press and

prosecuted in the police courts and think a little about how attitudes towards crime and criminals was influenced by the discourse of a criminal class.

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The Thames Police court had dispensed justice in the East End since its creation in the late eighteenth century. After 1845 a purpose built court in East Arbour Street, Stepney combined the old Thames and Lambeth courts and by looking at some of the extant records of proceedings there and the writing up of cases in the London press it is possible to say something about the nature (if not the extent) of crime in the area. Three quarters of those that were brought before the sitting magistrate in the 1880s were men, but women appeared in significant numbers nonetheless. Most defendants were prosecuted for some form of petty theft, for violence or for drunken and disorderly behaviour. On the 1st June 1887 only one of the 17 cases listed failed to mention drunkenness in the nature of the offence. On this day Elizabeth Shand and Hannah Moreby were discharged after being arrested on the previous evening for being drunk and disorderly. John Edmonds was fined 40s for being drunk and verbally abusing a policeman, while Mary Botely had no money to pay a fine and so was sent to gaol for 14 days for a like offence. John Doyle and Maria Mitchell were bound over to keep the peace having been arrested for fighting (whilst drunk of course) and Bella Blue-eyes was also sent down for 14 days for being found 'drunk and blasphemous' in the gutter. There were several other drunks including Edward Lushington who had been dismissed from the Rose and Crown pub in Bromley and in his rage had returned there, blind drunk, to challenge the entire bar to a fight. The magistrate fined him 10 shillings. On the 14th February 1887 Elizabeth Stride was fined 2s 6d for being drunk and disorderly and using foul language. Shortly before she was killed Kate Eddowes had been released from Bishopsgate police station after being arrested for being drunk in the streets hours earlier.

Along with the drunks were those brought in for violence. There were numerous cases of domestic violence which probably accounted for nearly half of all assaults that came to court. We have to remember that probably the majority of cases of petty violence never resulted in a prosecution. The odds were stacked against the woman who charged her husband with assault. The best she might hope for was a temporary protection from his cruelty while he was imprisoned but then at the same time she lost any income he might have brought in. Many wives and common law partners must have simply put up with abuse and only resorted to the courts under extreme duress. However, the amount of assault that was prosecuted at the Thames court does reflect the reality that this was a rough and violent area of the capital. There were over 400 prosecutions for assault in 1887 and *The Graphic* believed that this was more than in 'any other court in the metropolis'. More serious violence was also a regular if not every day, feature of the East End. So 1888 saw several homicide trials involving defendants from the East End including a Russian Jewess killed by her husband, another woman stabbed by her drunken spouse – a docker who appears to have lost his self-control in a domestic

argument; and the tragic case of a father who threw his son onto the pavement in his frustration at being evicted from his home. The press tended to report the most sensational cases in some depth – like the headless female torso that was found that year – while the more mundane cases were consigned to the margins.

My analysis of the Thames court records indicates that just over a quarter of all the hearings (or prosecutions) were for some form of petty property crime. However, this – as with prosecutions for assault – is in no way an accurate record of the extent of pilfering that went on in London in the 1880s. People stole from work and as Jennifer Davis work has shown many employers chose not to prosecute: it wasn't worth the time and effort and in some cases they may even have sympathised with the culprits. Dismissal was in many ways punishment enough. Minor criminals like the teenage William Dover were sent to gaol for a month for stealing £1 4s and 6d; Robert Richards avoided prison by paying a £2 fine for his theft of a pint pot from a local pub. John Farrington was committed for trial at the Old Bailey having been discovered breaking in to a camera shop in Spitalfields. Cases of robbery were often reported by the press as they helped paint an image of dangerous criminality in the area. Thus, the two 'rough looking' men that robbed a poor Chinese sailor on the West India Dock road were sentenced to two months imprisonment at hard labour. The maximum sentence a police court magistrate could award was six months and this was the reward for Charles Lawrence who embezzled money from a firm of iron merchants, despite them themselves pleading his case for clemency.

All this criminality was fairly petty, which is not to excuse it or downgrade its effects on the victims of crime – many of whom were within the communities from whom the criminals were drawn. However the way in which the press chose to focus attention on the courts must have contributed to the general sense of unease amongst the propertied classes. If one reads the newspapers of the period it is evident that such a drip feed of crime reportage would suggest that certain areas of the capital were indeed dens of crime and vice, populated by hardened felons and fuelled by drink and vice. When this is interwoven with a rhetoric of the criminal class – as espoused by Henry Mayhew and his co-authors – a race of villains with its own language, hierarchy and morality and by theories of criminology (from Lombroso's born criminal to Henry Maudsley's notions of hereditary criminality) it is very easy to see how an entire district of the Victorian capital could become demonized as a place of vice and crime. And this is evident not just in the writings of semi-scientific men but also in the images of the criminal class that appear in *Punch* and the other periodicals of the day. Criminals are routinely pictured as bullet-headed, stooping, Neanderthal figures and contrasted strongly with the upright guardians of the metropolitan police.

Of course, the identification of a class of criminals was a useful one for the authorities. It allowed tougher and tougher prison regimes, longer sentences and the creation of the notion of the habitual

offender. It meant that the idea of helping or reforming the offender took a back seat in the fight against predatory criminality and it served as ammunition for those that believed sections of the working class were no longer fit to belong to the great British Empire.

slide

So let me draw some of these themes together in this attempt to contextualise the Whitechapel murders within the wider lens of the social conditions of the East End in 1888.

The Whitechapel murders did not expose the social problems of the East End of London; those problems were already widely known and commented upon. Plenty of well-meaning and Christian minded members of the middle class had been working with the area's poor and needy for many years. There had been initiatives to improve housing conditions although these were private enterprises in building model dwellings and did little to help the very poorest. Likewise slum clearance schemes were predicated on the need to improve transport links and knock down the notorious rookeries that were seen as festering nurseries of crime. Those displaced could not afford to move too far from their old homes and communities and places where they might hope to find work. As a result hundreds merely crowded into nearby houses and rooms and made the problem of inadequate housing even worse.

The COS visited the homes of the poor and offered advice, help and sometimes money. They encouraged mothers to send their children to school and to keep their homes neat and tidy; they cautioned the menfolk against squandering what little they earned on the demon drink. The builders of model dwellings and the charities that administered them urged the inhabitants to ventilate their rooms and chastised them if they went behind with their rent. But in all of this they failed to really understand the people they were trying to help. While women like Helen Bosanquet, Beatrice Webb and Octavia Hill were driven by strong Christian principles and believed that self-help was better than indiscriminate charity they were ultimately simply tinkering around the edges of the problem. What could they really hope to know about poverty? What did they know about bringing up a family of five or six or seven or more children on a few shillings a week in one room when your husband was queuing at the docks every morning in the hope of gaining a few days' work? In reality the lives of the poor were so far apart from those of the wealthy middle class that they may have well as lived on different sides of the planet let alone the capital city.

And what we know about social conditions in the East End has, for the most part, been provided by the journals of these middle class social reformers, by social investigators like Booth and by the legions of journalists that peered into the abyss in the summer and autumn of 1888. As a result the image that emerges, of a degraded and beaten down district almost without hope of salvation, a dangerous cancer that threatened the very fabric of Victorian society, is in many ways a fabrication as

developed as many of the exotic propositions for Ripper suspects. In truth amongst the poverty there were many people who lived and worked and served their communities. The few documented recollections that have survived talk of shared resources, of conviviality, of neighbourliness. The inhabitants of the Rothschild model dwelling clubbed together to help those who for no fault of their own sometimes struggled to find their rent money. Booth's survey does show that the East End had high levels of poverty and supposed criminality but a careful scrutiny of his poverty maps also reveals a mixed community. There is little gold in the area but plenty of commerce and streets where people are at least comfortable and making a decent living. The East End bustled with life. The markets teemed with goods and produce. Costermongers sold all sorts of goods the streets, children raced about and the pubs and music halls echoed with laughter and singing.

Neither was the threat of revolution ever a reality in the East End. While many protested at their lack of work and asked for bread, it was a small minority that descended on Trafalgar Square and an even smaller proportion that attacked the rich men's clubs in Pall Mall. The working class were not without agency however. Match-making was backbreaking work; low paid and injurious to the health of the women that undertook it and when Bryant and May attempted to punish some of its employees for daring to expose the awful conditions its workers suffered the match girls came out on strike. They were supported by Annie Besant – a middle class woman with a track record for rabble rousing – but this was their fight. This, and the Great Dock Strike of the following year, shows another side to the East End. It reveals an area and a people that were not as degraded and demoralised as some contemporary commentators clearly believed.

As for the depictions of the area as one full of crime and the criminal class, this is equally simplistic. Yes there was plenty of crime in Whitechapel and plenty of rogues no doubt. But wherever deprivation exists alongside prosperity there will be some who turn to illegal activities to make ends meet as well as those that detach themselves from the mores of wider society if they think that it has failed to cater for them. The East End has continued to be associated with crime as any who orders a drink in the Blind Beggar public house just a few hundred yards from where Polly Nichols was murdered will quickly notice. The walls are home to pictures of the infamous Kray twins a reminder that it was here that Ronnie Kray shot and killed a gangland rival, George Cornell as he sat at the bar. Numerous British gangster movies are set in and around the East End all drawing inspiration from the area's dark history. Of course there is an alternative image of the East End as an area populated by chirpy cheeky cockneys who danced in the streets as Hitler's bombs devastated dockland in the Blitz. As Gareth Stedman Jones has suggested the authorities in the Second World War were happy to co-opt the reassuring image of the cheery cockney for its propaganda value.

It would seem to me that the East End can be anything you want it to be: city of dreadful delight, a playground for the super-rich, a festering sore that demonstrates the immorality of the working class

or even a labyrinth of dark alleys and courts at the heart of which lurks a primeval killer. None of which shows us the real east end – indeed even the BBC’s long running soap opera is filmed south of the river Thames and bears little resemblance to the area being transformed in time for the invasion of the world’s greatest athletes in 2012. So, for me the East End is nearly always presented through the eyes of people who are not eastenders and who offer their own interpretation of the area. This has important consequences for anyone looking at the Ripper murders of 1888. I would suggest that the Ripper was not, as the *Nemesis of Neglect* suggested, a product of the evils festering in Whitechapel. He may have been, indeed probably was, local but he was not created by his environment. Instead perhaps, his environment provided him with the opportunity and victims to satisfy his crazed desire to murder and mutilate.

ⁱ J. Marriott, *Beyond the Tower* (154)

ⁱⁱ The Star, 24th September 1888

ⁱⁱⁱ Joseph Mullens, ‘London Irreligion and Heathenism at Home’

^{iv} John Hollingshead, *Ragged in London in 1861*

^v Marriott, *Beyond the Tower* (214)

^{vi} George Sims, *How the Poor Live* (1889)

^{vii} Marriott, *Beyond the Tower* (164)

^{viii} Gray, *London’s Shadows* (131)

^{ix} W. Fishman, *1888* (11)

^x Gray, *London’s Shadows* (118)

^{xi} Israel Zangwill, *Children of the Ghetto* (21)

^{xii} Fishman, *1888* (166)