

## ARTICLE

# 'Bad Business': Capitalism and Criminality in Agatha Christie's Novels

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To the casual reader, Agatha Christie's fiction seems to be saturated by a deeply conservative culture and supportive of the capitalist status quo. There is indeed some evidence in Christie's prose that she identified with conservatism. Yet despite her leanings she adopted a critical stance on the world of business. She repeatedly depicted financiers as criminals, even murderers, during the inter-war years and later, in the post-war period, blurred the line between businesses and criminal conspiracies. Christie also used the crookedness of business to provide capitalism's victims with a motive for murder. The article explains the gap between Christie's political views and her portrayal of business by arguing that Christie's fundamental task was to fashion dystopias. In so doing she regarded it as more important to capture the spirit of the times than to propagandise in ways which matched her allegiances. Thus Christie's engagement with private enterprise provides a valuable snapshot of a society more critical of capitalism and, particularly between the wars, more ready to consider alternatives to it, than is the case in contemporary society.

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Popular culture hardly comes more popular than Agatha Christie. Christie is the best-selling novelist of all time, her novels having sold roughly two billion copies (York, 2007, 1; Bernthal, 2016, 3). She comes third in the rankings of the world's most-widely published books, behind only Shakespeare and the Bible. She is the world's most-translated author. Her fiction has generated an endless succession of television and film adaptations. A vast number of people are therefore regularly exposed to her novels and to the culture which permeates them. The politics which imbues her novels should therefore merit scholarly analysis; so too should Christie's stances on law and criminality. Though not much of Christie's fiction takes place in law courts or police stations, and whilst her works rarely focus on points of law, nonetheless her work engages centrally with law and lawlessness in a grander sense. In particular the capitalist system and its evolution over much of the twentieth century emerge as pervasive underlying themes of many of Christie's narratives. The way in which this account of capitalism interrelates with her delineation of criminality emerges as a seminal issue.

Outside the academy, Christie – with her frequent settings of country houses with servants – is often considered a conservative novelist whose writings endorsed capitalism and the class system. As Alison Light has observed, 'the assumption, so common now as to be almost unassailable, is that Christie's fiction is that of a "natural" Tory ... Her settings are assumed to be inherently backward-looking, her social attitudes simply snobbish, and her imaginary milieux an idealised picture of the long summers of the English upper middle class in a tightly class-bound society' (Light, 1991, 63). Julian Symons has argued that Christie's novels hark back to a time when social life was settled and people knew their places within it (Symons, 1981, 142). Similarly both Colin Watson and Gwen Robyns characterise the novels as nostalgic for a bygone middle class way of life (Watson, 1979, 171; Robyns, 1978, 219).

Recent scholarship, however, has demonstrated that Christie's prose is often subject to misconceptions. For instance academic analysis has revealed that her novels are far more feminist and far more broad-minded on matters of sexuality and gender than selective or superficial readings might suggest. In *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity*, for example, Merja Makinen has explored Christie's stance on gender, concluding that her female characters are 'diverse, dominant, swashbuckling and violently active', and that Christie is 'determinedly and deliberately egalitarian in relation to gender' (Makinen, 2006: 1). J.C. Bernthal in *Queering Agatha Christie* demonstrates that Christie's books frequently correspond to queer theory's indeterminacy of the self and non-reliance on stable identities, categories and binaries (Bernthal, 2016: 9). Lidia Kyzlinková, whilst not analysing Christie's stance on the capitalist system itself, has observed that Christie frequently criticises rather than endorses her characters' preoccupations with class and money (Kyzlinková, 1997: 116). Yet if Christie is subversive on matters of class, gender and sexuality, may we not also question whether Christie's vaunted economic conservatism might in fact be one more cliché which scholarship needs to undermine? There is nothing to be

gleaned in this regard from the author's own limited comments on her writing and politics (Christie, 1977). It may be, however, that her *fiction* is more revealing. In any event, by contrast with issues of class, gender and sexuality Christie's stance on the economic system and its relationship to criminality has yet to be fully explored.

The aim of this article, therefore, is to question the assumption that Christie's work advances an uncritical acceptance of capitalism. Rebecca Mills has already touched on this issue in her 2016 essay 'England's Pockets: Objects of Anxiety in Christie's Post-War Novels', in which she proposes that in Christie's *The Pale Horse*, first published in 1961, 'the real evil is capitalism', with murder being commodified and deaths forming part of a transaction (Mills, 2016: 39). This article argues that the association of capitalism with evil applies more generally in Christie's writings. Christie's trade was to fashion dystopias in which wickedness is rife and most characters are murder suspects. As an author with an apparent tenderness towards the Conservative Party she could have chosen to exclude the worlds of finance and business from these dystopias, yet in at least three short stories and three full-length novels she elected not to do so. In these stories, financiers and businesses *seem* respectable but their integrity is sham. In reality they are imbued with criminality. Christie repeatedly makes the link between the worlds of high finance and big business and the pursuit of criminal activity. Whilst the rest of her extensive oeuvre does not focus so directly on business or commerce neither does it contradict the position taken in these six works. Thus, I will argue, Christie's body of work contains no ringing endorsement of capitalism but rather strikes a sceptical note by highlighting the ease with which the practice of capitalism slides into criminality.

### Christie and the Conservatives

Paradoxically there might be reason for expecting Christie to treat private enterprise with kid gloves: her writings lightly suggest a partiality towards the Conservative Party. When Christie began her writing career the Conservatives were the main British party of the status quo, with the mantle of the main party of social change passing from the Liberal Party to the Labour Party. Whilst an author eager for sales would be wise not to broadcast her political preferences too overtly, there are nonetheless quite a number of indicators in her work which suggest that Christie identified with the Conservatives more than with Labour, as might be expected from a member of a family of Devonshire gentlefolk. It has even been suggested that Christie is a 'radical conservative thinker' who gives her novels a Burkean sub-text in which justice rarely comes from the state but from the actions of private persons (Hari, 2003). To be sure, we cannot be absolutely certain of Christie's partiality for the Conservatives since 'it is sometimes difficult to sort out from the pile of attitudes just when Dame Agatha had her tongue in her cheek and when she was slipping in signs of her own opinions' (Kyzlinková, 1997: 126). Nonetheless her soft spot for the Tories seems rather clearer than her stances on many other issues.

For a start, 'The Kidnapped Prime Minister' is a short story first published in 1924, which subtly suggests a Conservative bias. Whilst not openly Tory, the story's assumptions are thoroughly establishmentarian, lavishing praise on a fictional wartime Prime Minister, David McLean, who opposes a negotiated peace with Germany. McLean is an establishment figure whose premiership must be preserved at all costs (Christie, 1981c). A clearer identification with the Conservatives is seen in *The Rose and the Yew Tree*, a psychological novel centring around a Conservative election campaign for a Cornish seat in 1945 and first published two years after that election. The novel is dominated by Party members and supporters, suggesting that Christie's identification was with the Conservative Party. Their Labour opponents in the constituency are not even sketched (Christie, 2005a). At the end of the novel one character accuses another of trying to fit a 'design for life' on other people when they each have their own design (Christie, 2005a: 187), echoing a criticism of post-1945 socialistic paternalism. (Arguably Christie's post-war thrillers such as *Destination Unknown* (1979c), *They Came to Baghdad* (2003) and *Passenger to Frankfurt* (1973) likewise celebrate the individual against excesses of political collectivism).

The most astonishing Conservative-friendly tale however is the short story 'The Augean Stables' first published in 1947. Here, Britain is governed by the People's Party, seemingly the Conservative Party or National Government in disguise (for instance as a signifier of political orthodoxy the fictional Prime Minister's raincoat is compared to Stanley Baldwin's pipe or Neville Chamberlain's umbrella). Christie's famous detective Hercule Poirot is tasked by the Prime Minister with helping to cover up the fact that his much-loved predecessor in Downing Street was in reality a gigantic confidence trickster amassing a vast fortune. A newspaper, the *X-Ray News*, threatens to reveal the truth. Poirot assists in a cover-up, driven by the belief that the present Prime Minister is a 'sound man' whereas the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Everhard, is a demagogic radical. Everhard is described as 'a complete firebrand', 'reckless, belligerent and utterly tactless', whose premiership 'would be practically a dictatorship' (Christie, 1958: 103). Even his name connotes a *hard* line, *hard* left dogmatism. The story was published in a year in which the 1945–51 Labour government was nationalising key utility industries, and it is conceivable that Everhard represents Aneurin Bevan, the then unofficial leader of Labour's left wing, who at the time was putting the finishing touches on plans for Britain's National Health Service.

Poirot's ploy is to manufacture a sex scandal attached to the present Prime Minister's wife, who is also the former Prime Minister's daughter. The *X-Ray News* fills with stories of the wife being a depraved nymphomaniac. In reality the whole scenario has been set up by Poirot, with a stand-in actress impersonating the Premier's wife. The wife herself then sues the newspaper for libel, bankrupting it before it can reveal her father's corruption, and putting the country in a mood to dismiss attacks on the government as groundless smears. It could be argued that the story hardly casts the party of the Right in a favourable light, but on the other hand there is no indication that corruption extends beyond the former Prime Minister. Moreover the very fact that Poirot sees it as imperative to whitewash a swindler of the Right in order to defeat a demagogue of the Left is, by Christie standards, curiously lacking in ambivalence.

The suspicion that Christie had a soft spot for the Conservative Party is powerfully reinforced by her apparent disdain for Labour. On top of her unfavourable depiction of Mr Everhard, Christie displays a startling degree of anti-Labour bias in *The Secret Adversary* first published in 1922. The story imagines the possibility of a Labour *coup d'état* fomented by 'Labour extremists and revolutionaries'. These Labour types are not autonomous actors but are being manipulated: they are mere pawns in the game of the novel's arch-villain, the secret adversary 'Mr Brown' (Christie, 1976: 178–9). The crisis is resolved partly by a split in the Labour Party between its right wing and its left wing, Christie siding with the former. She differentiates between 'the more far-seeing among them [who] realised that what they proposed might well be a death-blow to the England that at heart they loved', whereas 'behind them were subtle, insistent voices at work, urging the memories of old wrongs, deprecating the weakness of half-and-half measures, fomenting misunderstandings' (Christie, 1976: 198–9). (The ideas that workers with grievances are putty in the hands of self-seeking demagogues and that their grievances are generally the result of misunderstandings are ones to which Christie returned from time to time).

Conservatives tend to voice support for the private sector. Yet, whilst it seems reasonably clear that Christie identified more with the Conservatives than with Labour, she nonetheless wrote six works of fiction which fashion a clear link between private enterprise and lawlessness. These works indicate that she privileged the creation of dystopias over conservative nostrums. In Christie's world, as Alison Light has pointed out, nothing is sacred. Light's analysis shows that the social attitudes in her novels do not dovetail with her likely party-political allegiance (Light, 1991: 67). Neither, I would argue, does her view of private enterprise.

### Early Christie: Financier as Perpetrator

In a trio of Christie short stories of the early 1920s financiers emerge as criminals. These stories are 'The Lost Mine' first published in 1923, 'The Million Dollar Bond Robbery' first published in 1924 and 'The Disappearance of Mr Davenheim' first published in 1924. 'The Lost Mine' opens with a friendly disagreement between Poirot and his friend Captain Hastings on the subject of investments. Hastings believes in making speculative investments, and is gently pushing Poirot to invest in the Porcupine oil fields, which promise astonishing returns. Poirot is adamant that he only makes prudent investments. The story proper involves one of 'the directors of an important company', a Mr Pearson, who is charged with negotiating the purchase of the map of a lost silver mine from Chinese businessman Wu Ling. In reality Pearson is a gambler and debtor, and he arranges to have Wu Ling abducted in order to steal the document, have a Chinese accomplice impersonate Wu Ling and receive the money for the sale of the document for himself. Pearson only aspires to diddle his company, but his oriental sidekicks go too far, killing Wu Ling and dumping his body in the Thames. Having exposed Pearson, Poirot extracts a broader lesson from the adventure, imploring Hastings only to make conservative investments since 'the directors of the Porcupine Company may be so many Mr Pearsons!' Poirot thereby extrapolates from Pearson's villainy that criminality is rife in business, and that investments are a minefield. It is not merely a case of 'one bad egg' (Christie, 1993).

'The Million Dollar Bond Robbery' involves a villain particularly high up in the London and Scottish Bank, its joint general manager 'the stodgy old man, Mr Shaw'. He and his colleague Mr Vavasour task Mr Vavasour's nephew, Philip Ridgeway, with crossing the Atlantic by ship with millions of pounds worth of Bonds. The Bonds appear to vanish from Ridgeway's cabin as the ship nears America. The twist in the tale is that they were not stolen on board since in reality they never reached the ship. They were stolen beforehand by Shaw, who substituted fakes for the Bonds when they were still at the Bank (Christie, 1981a). In 'The Disappearance of Mr Davenheim', Mr Davenheim is senior partner of Davenheim and Salmon, well-known bankers and financiers. He vanishes from home, prompting fears that he has been kidnapped. In reality he has been embezzling money from his company on a grand scale, prompting the collapse of the Bank shortly after he vanishes. Davenheim disappeared of his own accord having created a new identity for himself. Christie thereby links the criminality of the senior partner with the failure of the institution (Christie, 1981b).

These three short stories have elements in common. In each of them, the perpetrator is someone high up in the company who ignobly tries to pin the blame on someone lower in the capitalist pecking order. Thus Pearson's scapegoat is one Charles Lester, a young bank clerk; Shaw tries to incriminate Ridgeway, a more junior colleague at his bank; Davenheim sets up a Mr Lowan, a less-prominent businessman. Furthermore in each story the miscreant also poses in some fashion as someone of a lower social class. This corresponds to a key theme of Christie's plotting: the importance of the imposter. R.A. York has argued that Christie's 'lavish profusion of identities' reflected a world in which social mobility was increasing allowing people the freedom of will and ease of movement to deny their pasts (York, 2007: 38). Pearson embarrasses Poirot over a Chinese meal by impersonating an old sea dog; Shaw poses as a liner passenger in order to dispose of the fake Bonds; Davenheim adopts the identity of a lowly felon. Christie thereby projects social class as a system prone to deception. As Alison Light has observed, exactly what social position is occupied becomes less important than the possible bogusness of it (Light, 1991: 94). Susan Rowland reinforces the point by highlighting how often in Christie 'class-as-theatricality' drives the plot-dynamics (Rowland, 2001: 28). At the same time those at the pinnacle of the class hierarchy may abuse their class positions by incriminating lesser mortals. All in all this hardly constitutes a glowing endorsement of the class system with which Christie has been crudely associated.

Finance is Christie's exclusive emphasis in these early short stories. This focus reflects the particular dysfunctions of British capitalism at the time she wrote them. John Stevenson observes that the wealth-owners of the inter-war years acquired their prosperity disproportionately from commerce and finance. They made their fortunes from processing wealth rather than creating it. Accordingly the wealthy were becoming a predominantly metropolitan class

(Stevenson, 1984: 334–340). Christie's plots reflect the decline of the landed gentry relative to the rise of finance. Most vividly, her short story 'The Adventure of Johnnie Waverly', first published in 1923, envisaged a financially-embarrassed country-squire father who pretends to kidnap his own son in order to obtain money from his rich wife (Christie, 1983.) Furthermore in Britain in 1914–45 the self-made entrepreneurial millionaire was the exception rather than the rule (Stevenson, 1984: 338). There is no suggestion that Messrs Pearson, Shaw or Davenheim are self-made.

The series of financier-criminals in 'The Lost Mine', 'The Million Dollar Bond Robbery' and 'The Disappearance of Mr Davenheim' fitted the mood of the country only a few years after the end of the First World War. The experience of war fostered an exaltation of the state. During the war the state had taken over some of the largest industries, generating a mood in which permanent public ownership of key industries seemed imminent. In the event there was no nationalisation, but according to some accounts other aspects of socialism fared better, such as the pursuit of equality and the enlargement of social welfare. Indeed Prime Minister David Lloyd George's principal promise of 'homes fit for heroes' was itself a *statist* commitment, and his failure to fulfil it discredited him. Moreover, war strengthened the labour movement, the Labour Party adopting the socialist constitutional aim of a British economy based on common ownership, together with a new policy programme based on 'the socialisation of industry' and 'a revolution in national finance'. Labour resented the fact that the wartime coalition had financed the war not through progressive taxation but through costly loans which would now have to be repaid: 'too long has our National Finance been regulated, contrary to the teaching of Political Economy, according to the wishes of the possessing classes *and the profits of the financiers*' (emphasis added). The period after the First World War was therefore an epoch in which financiers were in the dog-house from the outset (Mowat, 1955: 17–21).

This animosity was reinforced by scandals which served to fan the flames of resentment towards financiers, principally the affair of Horatio Bottomley, which showed that their misdeeds were not mere chicanery but actually criminal. Bottomley was jailed for fraud in 1922, shortly before the publication of Christie's three short stories. Robert Graves argues that Bottomley's fall was a significant reason for a swing in the popular mood in favour of socialism. Bottomley had been a celebrity populist campaigner during the war in favour of the war effort. Subsequently an MP, he had established a 'Victory Bonds Club' which enabled poorer savers to pool their resources in order to purchase Government Victory Bonds. In reality Bottomley embezzled his savers' funds, spending lavishly on a lifestyle of champagne, women and horse racing (Graves, 1995: 76–80). Bottomley's career was tied to the cult of celebrity, and indeed he had ambitions to become a press baron to rival Lords Rothermere and Beaverbrook. It is not difficult to discern the influence of the Bottomley scandal on Christie's three short stories.

Whilst Messrs Pearson, Shaw and Davenheim hardly qualify as celebrities, nonetheless Christie's focus is clearly on *individual* financier-fraudsters rather than on a collective corporate criminality. Her financier-criminals may not seek celebrity, yet she individuates them from their companies and the discovery of their crimes must ultimately lead each of them to personal infamy. More broadly, Christie's emphasis on individual financial criminality reflected not only the Bottomley scandal but also the wider sweep of the early twentieth century, in which wealth, fame and infamy were closely connected: it was an era in which the 'register of the rich rolled on like a ground base in the cacophonous symphony of celebrity' (Inglis, 2010: 101).

### Christie's Middle Period: *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*

Whilst these three short stories show that Christie hardly gave the financial sector a bill of clean health, the novel *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* first published in 1940 allowed Christie to explore the villainy of the magnate in fuller form. The novel has rightly been characterised by Mark Aldridge as 'more heavily situated in the "real world" than normal' and this is its strength (Aldridge, 2016: 258). The story begins with Poirot visiting his dentist. Within the hour, the dentist is murdered. Poirot investigates, and eventually uncovers the murderer as a Mr Anthony Blunt. Head of England's largest bank, Blunt is described as 'a man of vast wealth, a man who said Yes or No to Governments ... A man in whose hands lay supreme power' (Christie, 1982: 15–16). Significantly, therefore, Christie sees capitalist enterprise as pulling the strings of government. Like Christie's earlier financiers Blunt is not really self-made: rather, he married money.

When Poirot exposes Blunt as the murderer, Blunt presents the sleuth with a novel defence:

If I was ruined and disgraced – the country, my country was hit as well. For I've done something for England, M. Poirot. I've held it firm and kept it solvent. It's free from Dictators – from Fascism and Communism. I don't really care for money as money. I do like power – I like to rule – but I don't want to tyrannize. We are democratic in England – truly democratic. We can grumble and say what we think and laugh at our politicians. We're free. I care for all that – it's been my life's work. But if I went – well you know what would probably happen. I'm needed M. Poirot. [...] I am necessary to the continued peace and well-being of this country. (Christie, 1982: 186–7)

By this stage Blunt has masterminded three murders. By elevating himself to the role of unelected, unaccountable guarantor of his country's democracy he is able to advance a utilitarian argument as to why he should not be subject to the ordinary law of the land and should be allowed to get away with his crimes. In so doing he belittles his victims: one he describes as 'a woman with the brains of a hen', whilst he dismisses his dentist victim with the words 'but there *are* other dentists'. Poirot appears to share Blunt's view that the pursuit of Treasury orthodoxy – 'solvent' and 'firm' benevolent capitalism – is a bulwark against despotism: the German experience of inflation would have made this a strong argu-



ment. Nonetheless Poirot concludes that he is not concerned with nations but with private individuals who have the right not to have their lives taken away. We can discern in the disagreement between Blunt and Poirot a clash between collectivism and individualism, or between utilitarianism and an emphasis on individual rights. Poirot's view ultimately triumphed in the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and European Convention on Human Rights and in the evolution of the broader post-war rights culture.

*One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* also features a character who serves as the mirror image of Blunt: an American socialist, Howard Raikes. Considered by Poirot to be a 'dangerous young man', Raikes believes that the old corrupt system of finance must be swept away, because the worldwide net of bankers constitutes a spider's web obstructing progress. Although Raikes is not the murderer he admits to not caring about the death of 'one miserable dentist', since the overriding priority must be to create 'a new world', a complete reorganisation of society (Christie, 1982: 64–9). Howard Raikes would not resonate today, the contemporary left having softened its desire to replace capitalism in response to several decades of neoliberal hegemony (see Nicol, 2017). Tellingly therefore the character was excluded from the television adaptation of the novel in ITV's *Agatha Christie's Poirot* in 1992.

On one level *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* appears to advance the case for orthodox economics. Inspector Japp extols 'good sound Conservative finance' (Christie, 1982: 33) and Poirot's secret services chum Mr Barnes condemns radicals who would 'sweep away the old order, the Tories, the Conservatives, the Diehards, the hard-headed suspicious Business Men' (Christie, 1982: 57). The overt partiality of these two public servants is rather striking. No less striking however is the way in which Christie deftly emphasises the common ground between Raikes the Marxist and Blunt the magnate: *both* are condemned for their lack of concern for the individual. Ultimately, however, this equidistance disintegrates, as Blunt heads for the gallows as murderer whilst Raikes is imagined as the victor in the struggle for a completely new society to replace capitalism. This is despite the fact that Blunt in his public persona stands for everything Poirot holds dear (Christie, 1982: 188). It is Blunt's *criminality* which creates the opportunity for Raikes to capture the political space that Blunt vacates through arrest and disgrace. Thus Poirot at the end of the story tells Raikes and his girlfriend Jane Olivera (Blunt's niece) that the world is theirs, to construct a new heaven and new earth; and that he only asks that there be freedom and pity. The ending of *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* therefore clearly anticipates some form of socialism replacing the capitalist system.

The novel's conclusion thereby highlights the precariousness of capitalism in the late 1930s reflecting the highly critical attitude towards capitalism at the time, and the perception that viable alternatives were available to orthodox economics. To be sure, in the wake of the slump of the 1930s the political elite shifted in favour of economic activism. Thus Harold Macmillan, who wrote *The Middle Way* in 1938, advocated a mixed economy and planning and was pressing for a new centre party with a large Labour contingent, whilst Lloyd George was presenting the government with proposals for a British version of Roosevelt's New Deal (Pimlott, 1977: 145–7). Within the Labour Party, however, the move towards state intervention was particularly marked, borne out of the perceived failure of the second Labour government to bring about economic revival. The late 1930s witnessed a powerful intellectual trend – the revival of British socialism (Morgan, 1990). The previous Labour leadership had ultimately abandoned the Party by defecting to the National Government; in its stead a new leadership was emerging which wished to pursue a clear democratic socialist path distinct from the 'Lib-Labism' which had characterised Ramsay MacDonald's premiership and Philip Snowden's chancellorship. Party leader Clement Attlee, writing in 1937, discerned a 'spirit of a new era' in which 'the dominant issue of the twentieth century is socialism' To this end he sought to dissociate Labour from MacDonald's 'philosophy of gradualness' which he regarded as 'almost indistinguishable from Conservatism' (Attlee, 1937). An intellectual head of steam was generated by disappointment with MacDonaldism and the 1930s slump, and a volume of publications appeared arguing for a more radical Labour programme. To this end Hugh Dalton wrote *Practical Socialism* (1935), Douglas Jay penned *The Socialist Case* (1937) and Evan Durbin published *Case for Democratic Socialism* (1940) (Jay, 1980). These authors promoted 'socialism focused on state management of a still largely capitalist economy *where a public sector dominated*' (Pimlott 1985, 223). Significantly, like Christie's Howard Raikes, these authors sought to link socialist economic policy to ideas of human freedom. Durbin, for instance, believed that economic freedom was not possible in an economy based on the profit motive, and that a central planning authority was necessary. Similarly Dalton sought a Supreme Economic Authority, responsible to the Cabinet, to plan the fight against poverty, insecurity and unemployment (Foote, 1997, 183–199).

Labour's trend towards (comparative) radicalism culminated in the party's publication in 1937 of *Labour's Immediate Programme*, which specified policies for a five-year term: planning through a national investment board; nationalisation of the Bank of England, coal, power and transport; a 40-hour working week, paid holidays and the improvement of health services. In the year in which *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* was published, the onset of the Second World War presented an invaluable opportunity to show the viability of, if not necessity for, the Labour Party's policies (Thorpe, 1987: 98). The war effort was requiring the implementation of Labour's state intervention and collectivism, and a shelving of the Conservative culture of free enterprise (Pearce, 1994: 14). In Britain therefore in the era of *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*, socialism based on economic planning and a dominant public sector seemed an ever more serious alternative to capitalism. Christie's novels reflected capitalism's precarious position.

Some scholars have suggested that *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* adds to Christie's air of mystery as regards her own political and economic views. Robert Barnard has proposed that the ambivalence of *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* – Poirot lauding Blunt yet not exempting him from criminal responsibility – means that the reader can attribute no opinion

to Christie as author, one way or the other, on the subjects of politics or international finance (Barnard, 1980: 57–58). High finance *may* be pursued with integrity or it *may* spawn the abuse of power. Barnard's view is endorsed by Mary Anne Ackershoek, who argues that the end-result of Christie's misdirection is that we have no reliable way of knowing what Christie's intentions as an author (Ackershoek, 1997: 123). Yet, I would argue, *contra* Barnard and Ackershoek, that the very fact that Christie chooses *not* to exempt the world of high finance from the dysfunctional worlds which she creates, means that she is taking a stance. In particular to associate the practice of capitalism with *murder* as she does in *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* – and not just one murder but serial murders – is really rather uncompromising and goes way beyond the frauds committed in her three earlier anti-financier stories. The bigger picture is that despite identifying more with the Conservatives than with Labour, she repeatedly invents stories in which – contrary to Tory nostrums – the high echelons of capitalism present fertile soil for the exercise of the most serious forms of criminality.

### Late Christie: Crime as Business

In the post-war period Christie altered the nature of her corporate villains. The broad theme remained unchanged: respectable business conceals base criminality. However, in place of the single financier-perpetrator out on a frolic of his own, Christie explored the idea of the business itself as a criminal conspiracy. There is an emphasis therefore on collective rather than individual evil. Indeed, in both *The Pale Horse* (first published in 1961) and *At Bertram's Hotel* (first published in 1965) the puzzle focuses on who heads the criminal organisation.

It may be that Christie found the idea of a criminal collective more alarming since evil is diffuse and not dependent on a single wrongdoer. Yet an emphasis on businesses-as-collectives also reflected a changed social era. In the post-war period there was more emphasis on the efforts of government to regulate the economy. The cult of the entrepreneur-as-celebrity took something of a back seat. The 1940s was the era of nationalisation: the private sector was at a low ebb and took some time to restore its previous legitimacy. In that period financiers and tycoons for a time adopted a lower profile. This reflected changing class relations.

Between the wars, many thought the polarisation between the social classes remained acute: indeed, during the Second World War, the social research organisation Mass Observation found that the political change which people most commonly wanted to see after the War was a reduction in class distinctions. The rise of the Labour Party and trade unions contributed to a more pervasive sense of class (Stevenson, 1984: 345). These divisions were blurred only mildly by a degree of social mobility and the growth of mass consumerism (Stevenson, 1984: 349).

This desire to soften class differences chimes with the way in which Christie tracks social change through the servants in her novels. Christie's first book *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* originally published in 1920 features traditional servant Dorcas, lamented as 'an old fashioned servant so fast dying out' (Christie, 1981d: 114). From the outset, therefore, Christie chronicles nostalgia for a bygone sense of hierarchy. Yet in certain instances in Christie's post-war novels she establishes a rather more egalitarian relationship between servant and employee. An example is provided by the character of Cherry Baker from *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* first published in 1962, a novel in which social change emerges as an important theme. Cherry cleans for and chats to Miss Marple, Christie's elderly spinster sleuth, with none of the old-fashioned stiffness of earlier domestics. Cherry lives on 'the Development' in the village, the new Council estate. Moreover Cherry fashions her own favourable arrangements with Miss Marple: she and her husband will live in rooms above Miss Marple's kitchen, allowing Cherry to look after Miss Marple and enabling Cherry's husband to play his classical records more loudly than on the Development (Christie, 1979a). Relative egalitarianism is also apparent in *A Daughter's a Daughter* first published in 1952. Ann Prentice's servant Edith talks freely to her mistress about Ann's personal life and that of her daughter; Edith even telephones Ann's friend the distinguished Dame Laura Whitstable to urge her to meddle in Ann's affairs. Ann's new boyfriend Richard is appalled at Edith's freedom of speech: 'servants had not spoken so fifteen years ago' (Christie, 2005b: 243). Christie makes the effect of labour-market tightening on the mistress-servant relationship explicit: Ann 'spoils' Edith because there are not many servants about to spoil, and besides she is a friend not just a servant (Christie, 2005b: 223). The social democratic consensus which became established after 1945 meant that a rather more moderate form of capitalism came to the fore, tempered by cross-party agreement in favour of full employment, a welfare state and a substantial public sector. Just as societal consensus affected Christie's depiction of servants so too the mild increase in social equality would have had an impact on the portrayal of high society, lending less resonance to a focus on an individual grand financier. By the same token financiers did not suffer the same notoriety as they had in the wake of the First World War. Collectivism had come to the fore, affecting the perception of the business world. Against this backdrop it made good sense for Christie to free herself from the notion of the singular black-sheep financier villain and explore instead the idea of business *organisations* devoted to the pursuit of crime.

One such exploration, *The Pale Horse*, is the story of an organisation which murders individuals for profit. Clients attend a shabby office, meet a disbarred lawyer and make a large bet with him that an inconvenient relative will live beyond a certain date. If he or she dies, the client must pay up. The client then visits a former public house, The Pale Horse, where he or she encounters the inhabitants, three female mystics. They perform incantations and *will* the victim to perish. In reality the victim's passing is eased by a retired pharmacist working on information supplied to him by a number of opinion survey ladies: he replaces household items with substitutes infected with the poison thallium. Quite a bit of outsourcing is therefore involved in the business. The lawyer points out that the making of a bet is perfectly legal and above board, and that the notion of causing death by mystic incantations would be ridiculed in

court. The outsourcing nonetheless handily shifts attention from the murderer to those in the organisation with lesser culpability. The novel's hero and heroine emphasise the intolerability of having a business organisation which goes around bumping people off for profit: it is not hot-blooded murder deriving from hatred or jealousy but murder as a *business*, which takes no account of the victim's identity (Christie, 1979b: 89, 113).

Christie may possibly have gained inspiration from the true-life serial killers of the day who murdered for profit. John Haigh, the acid bath murderer, who predominantly targeted wealthy couples for financial gain, was executed in 1949. John Bodkin Adams was tried and acquitted of murder in 1957 but after his death Sir Patrick Devlin voiced the widespread suspicion that he was a 'mercenary mercy killer' profiting from the wills of the patients whose deaths he 'eased' (Devlin, 1985). These figures may well have furnished inspiration to Christie since both chose victims other than family members and killed for profit. Nonetheless these men acted as individual 'entrepreneurs', whereas Christie goes further in *The Pale Horse* in aligning the serial killing to a business *organisation*.

A business also engages in collective criminality in *At Bertram's Hotel*. Bertram's Hotel seems to be a charmingly old-fashioned, comfortable hotel catering for the upper echelons of society: dowagers, colonels and clergymen. Miss Marple stays there in order to recapture happy girlhood memories. Yet the hotel proves to be a front for organised robberies on a massive scale, one of the biggest and best crime syndicates known for years. Miss Marple is ultimately unsurprised, since Bertram's seemed all too good to be true, a beautiful performance yet somehow unreal (Christie, 1968: 182). A prestigious capitalist establishment, the epitome of respectability, thereby slides into criminality. Christie novels are often rife with imposters, but *At Bertram's Hotel* focuses on a corporate imposter. The narrative of happenings at Bertram's is punctuated by episodes of a train robbery. There is a rude contrast between the hotel scenes and the robbery scenes, yet in reality the hotel business and the crime business turn out to be one and the same enterprise, so the bright line which Christie fashions between these two narratives is itself illusory. Christie may have drawn inspiration from the Great Train Robbery of 1963, a conspiracy to rob the Glasgow-to-London mail train by a gang of sixteen men. The crime necessitated considerable planning, yet the perpetrators were apprehended and were tried, convicted and sentenced in 1964. Christie's genius was to link a robbery of that type to a high-status, highly regarded capitalist institution. The incongruity is not only striking but alarming: nothing is what it seems and our confidence in the integrity of business is undermined.

Significantly too Christie in *At Bertram's Hotel* repeatedly draws attention to the common ground between the crime syndicate and a normal business. For example just like an efficient business the organisation's crimes are meticulously organised with substantial manpower. The organisation's leader has the qualities of a successful entrepreneur: 'vibrant, alive, a personality one could not ignore for a moment' (Christie, 1968: 143). These are the sort of comments which Christie frequently reserves to describe successful business leaders. Inspector McNeil says that he does not believe there is a Master Criminal involved: he insists that there is more likely to be a Board of Directors, headed by a chairman, planning everything centrally (Christie, 1968: 30–31). Faced with the growing organisation the police debate at some length whether it might over-expand, with repeated comparisons being made to businesses which fail having committed the same error (Christie, 1968: 31).

### Christie's Victims: Backstories of Business Villainy

There is therefore ample evidence in Christie's fiction to support the thesis that Christie, despite Tory leanings, persistently portrays capitalist business as providing fertile ground for criminality. There is however also some useful supplementary evidence within Christie's oeuvre for a broader notion of capitalism's propensity to bring out the worst in people. This relates in particular to the backstories of certain of Christie's murder *victims*. Christie is partial to delving into her victims' pasts and revealing business unscrupulousness which may conceivably have led to their being murdered. Examples include *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (originally published in 1938), *Crooked House* (first published in 1949) and *A Pocketful of Rye* (first published in 1953). In *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* the murder victim is Simeon Lee, a rich patriarch who made his money in diamonds then became even richer manufacturing mining machinery (Christie, 2013a: 77). Lee admits to having been a very wicked man and to having got up to all manner of misdeeds in South Africa (Christie, 2013a: 111). According to another character Lee was not exactly a crook, but sailed pretty near the wind with no morals to boast about (Christie, 2013a: 138).

The idea of a successful businessman who somehow sails close to the wind without actually committing illegality became a Christie trope. In *Crooked House* the victim is Aristide Leonides, another extremely rich head-of-the-family figure. Inspector Taverner tells us that Leonides was 'crooked but not a crook': he never did anything outside the law, but was the sort who thought up all ways round the law. 'Nothing he did was ever illegal – but as soon as he'd got on to it, you had to have a law about it, if you know what I mean. But by that time, he'd gone on to the next thing' (Christie, 2017: 17). The impression is thereby given of a legislature kept busy having to criminalise all the unethical business stratagems of Leonides only to find that he had moved on to novel sharp practices. Finally Rex Fortescue, murdered in *A Pocketful of Rye*, is known to the police as 'a twister', someone who puts through deals which are 'questionable to say the least', but which (again) have always been 'just within the law' (Christie, 1984: 21). These examples show that business integrity is evidently in short supply in Christie's universe even where the individual concerned is the victim not the perpetrator of Christie's killings. Perhaps more importantly from the point of view of legal scholarship they evince a perception of a fuzzy line between lawful yet unscrupulous business dealings on the one hand, and criminality on

the other. This surely reflects Christie's doubts that law can capture the full range of swindles perpetrated within the business world.

Capitalism is also criticised through the way in which losing a fortune from dubious investments provides a motive for murder. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* first published in 1926 the perpetrator is obliged to 'put the screw on too hard' to his blackmail victim because he has lost a fortune in speculation (Christie, 2013b: 293). Likewise in *The Sittaford Mystery*, originally published in 1931, the murderer feels obliged to kill for money because 'he'd been investing in some rotten shares or other and had lost a terrible lot of money' (Christie, 1971: 184–5). Both these murderers get their fingers burnt due to capitalism's dodgy excesses and resort to homicide as the only way out. The link between speculative investments and criminality had already been drawn by Christie in 'The Lost Mine'.

### Good Business: Meadowbank School

We have seen how Christie frequently likens the world of business to the world of crime. In one of her late era novels, however, she is able to come up with a more positive vision of private enterprise. This is *Cat Among the Pigeons*, first published in 1959, which features Meadowbank School, a prestigious private girls' school, at which three teachers are murdered. Unlike Bertram's Hotel and the Pale Horse organisation, Meadowbank is not a corporate perpetrator but a corporate *victim* of crime, coming perilously close to closure as the murders play out.

Meadowbank, we are told, 'was a very expensive school, but that was not really the point' (Christie, 1962: 11). Whilst profitability is an absolute prerequisite, education is the essence. This prioritisation is underlined towards the end of the novel when, murders solved, the headmistress Miss Bulstrode encourages the young, original-minded Miss Rich to become her successor. (This also constitutes a remarkably feminist ending by the standards of the 1950s, since Miss Rich has had a child out of wedlock.) Miss Bulstrode chides Miss Rich to become a better tradesman and to market her ideas. Yet at the same time she praises Miss Rich's sense of mission: 'You're full of ideals – it's the teaching that matters to you and the ethical side of it. Your vision's quite right. It's the girls that matter' (Christie, 1962: 180). Christie thereby fashions her own middle way, in which a calling nobler than moneymaking drives successful business endeavour. This forms a contrast to Christie's earlier financier villains motivated entirely by pecuniary gain. (Christie's principal sleuth Hercule Poirot arguably adopts the same prioritisation, making enough money by the time of *Murder on the Orient Express*, first published in 1934, to 'satisfy both [his] needs and [his] caprices' and therefore turning down a case on the basis of the immorality of the potential client (Christie, 1974: 26).)

### Conclusion

As Anthony Bradney has shown in his analysis of television programmes, one of the most worthwhile areas for legal study of popular culture is to examine the contrasts between various characters' attitude to law. Bradney reminds us that it should be a pressing concern for the legal academy which kind of individual seeks to live lawfully and which kind rejects law (Bradney, 2011). Agatha Christie did not write many stories in which business and commerce took centre stage. Yet in those she did write, for all her Tory leanings, she repeatedly chose to make capitalist enterprise a focus for criminality, numbering tycoons and businesses amongst her perpetrators of robbery, embezzlement and murder. Their inclusion as law-breakers should serve to temper the reputation of Christie as stalwart of the social and economic status quo. Rather than whitewash the private sector she strove to capture the spirit of the age. She wanted her novels to be true to life and grounded in the real world. She therefore drew on the reality that was readily apparent from the time in which she lived. Christie's novels involving the world of business thereby provide a precious insight into her era: particularly in the case of her inter-war novels they exemplify the critical stance of a society in which the public perceived serious alternatives to capitalism. Her post-war works reflected a more collectivist age by featuring businesses as criminal conspiracies. Consistently in these dystopias, the veneer of capitalist integrity – be it of Bertram's Hotel, Anthony Blunt or financiers generally – turns out to be illusory. In the Christie universe, *everything* is unsettling and dangerous: the capitalist system is no exception.

### Note

- <sup>1</sup> Future scholarship may also serve to undermine sweeping statements about Christie's treatment of Jewish people. Christie is often accused of anti-Semitism, but an examination of all her Jewish characters would seem to reveal a more nuanced picture with sympathetic portrayals as well as unfavourable depictions. There has yet to be the comprehensive analysis which the subject merits. A very full analysis would likewise be required in order to discuss the connections of Christie's Jewish characters to the worlds of business or finance; it could quite possibly constitute an article in itself. I have therefore omitted the anti-Semitism aspect from this article.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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