

The Politics of the Poor: the East End of London, 1885–1914

Review Number:

426

Publish date:

Monday, 1 November, 2004

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ISBN:

199270554X

Date of Publication:

2004

Price:

£55.00

Pages:

252pp.

Publisher:

Clarendon Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

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The central theme of this book can be summed up as ‘neither electoral sociology nor linguistic turn’. Instead, its author emphasises the micro context of politics – how local social and cultural milieux shaped the reception of political ideas, and hence the fortunes of political parties. His focus is, thus, ‘how ... ideas were filtered by localized social and economic structures and processes of communication and popular culture’ (p. 12). And, have no doubt, for the most part he does this brilliantly – this is the most thought-provoking and refreshingly original book about British politics that I have read for some time. Brodie’s focus is East End politics between the Home Rule crisis and the First World War, and his principal target is the historiography of East End Conservatism. He convincingly demolishes accepted explanations linking Conservative political strength in the East End to extreme poverty, casual labour, protectionism and anti-alien sentiment. Conservatism, he argues, was strongest in the least impoverished areas of the East End – in places such as Stepney and Mile End where, by Booth’s standards, the bulk of the population lived in ‘comfort’, and skilled workers and clerks outnumbered the casual poor.

Contrary to the arguments of Davis and Tanner, Brodie demonstrates that no part of the East End boasted a true ‘slum vote’.⁽¹⁾ Through painstaking work linking electoral registers to census enumerators’ returns, he shows that the typical East End house in multiple occupation rarely boasted more than one voter, despite case law suggesting that each sub-tenant was also entitled to claim the household franchise. Landlords generally let the whole property to a ‘chief tenant’, who would then let sections of the house to sub-tenants to help cover the rent. Brodie shows not only that ‘chief tenants’ were usually the only ones to make it on to the register, but also that they generally took more rooms than their tenants. Most chief tenants had large families, which was why they needed more rooms, but they were also more prosperous than their neighbours – they had to be to take on responsibility for a whole house. This ground-breaking work on electoral

registers allows Brodie to demonstrate that, contrary to Paul Thompson's arguments, manual workers dominated the electorate across the East End, but that these electors were nonetheless far from representative of the population as a whole. (2) Brodie shows that, in social and economic terms, the composition of the Parliamentary electorate was broadly similar across the East End, with a strong bias towards regularly employed, older family men in all constituencies. Nowhere did electoral politics reach down to the casual residuum, so this cannot have been a bulwark of popular Conservatism (even if Liberals sometimes liked to argue differently).

Brodie therefore reminds us that the East End was socially more diverse than is often allowed. As others have observed, the apparent separateness of 'the East End' helped fashion an 'imagined slum' of depravity and immiseration, which contemporary 'explorers' and philanthropists often had good reason to reinforce. (3) But Brodie argues that we should take Booth's more sanguine view of East End poverty at face value: that almost everywhere comfort predominated over poverty, and that in much of the East End the great political question was not 'what to do about the casual poor?', but rather how to satisfy the aspirations of the better off (though this was not something much welcomed by Booth). Throughout the book Brodie makes good use of Booth and other late Victorian and Edwardian social investigators. Particularly impressive are the sections where he reconstructs snatches of working-class culture and politics by carefully decoding investigators' texts (notably Cornford on lodging house protectionism and Loane on working-class resistance to social condescension). That said, sources are sometimes accepted too uncritically if they support an argument – for instance Krause's account of unemployed dockers insisting that they had no time to protest in Trafalgar Square (p. 18), or worse Rogers's partisan explanations of Liberal abstentionism in the wake of the great 1886 electoral debacle (p. 127).

Overall, Brodie's grasp of the complexity and diversity of working-class political culture is compelling. For instance, he constructs a fascinating picture of coster politics, arguing that their status in working-class districts meant all parties worked hard to cultivate their support. He accepts that some local coster unions came under the sway of anti-alien, Conservative politics after 1900, but demonstrates that most did not. But Brodie does more than simply demolish established mythologies about East End Conservatism; he offers a rich and challenging analysis of the relationship between religiosity and partisanship. Building on the work of Hugh McLeod and Sarah Williams, Brodie insists that we need to recognise the importance of 'marginal' denominational allegiances among urban workers. (4) In other words, while, by national standards, the numbers regularly attending church may have been fairly low in the East End, the influence of the church was still extensive. Brodie argues that marginal attachments counted for most in 'respectable' working-class districts characterised by highly privatised, home-centred life-styles. Here church visitors were more readily welcomed into working-class homes, giving them the chance subtly to influence political attitudes. According to Brodie, the influence of such visitors was most important, not in making little Conservatives, but in weakening the resolve of instinctive anti-Conservatives to vote in certain critical elections. Brodie stresses that the East End Conservative vote was remarkably stable across the four decades, whereas the progressive vote varied wildly between elections, with nadirs in 1886, 1895 and 1900 and peaks in 1892, 1906 and 1910. He suggests that in elections where Liberalism was divided nationally, Conservative-leaning visitors found it relatively easy to use their influence with voters' wives to spread doubt about the personal character of local progressive candidates, thereby encouraging the abstentions needed to deliver Conservative victories. He points to Bromley South-East as proof of his case – here both the Church and its network of social visitors were strongly progressive in outlook, and in consequence, he suggests, the progressive vote proved much more stable.

It is here that the argument seems to break down somewhat. For one thing, we are back to the old habit of explaining Conservative success largely in terms of Liberal/Labour failure – the solid block of working-class and lower-middle-class Conservatism is left largely unexplained. But the problem runs deeper than this. It is as though, having sketched out the social bases of politics more thoroughly than his predecessors, Brodie is determined to construct an argument that will wholly banish parties, ideas and issues from the story. In consequence, little is uncovered about party organisation and party activism in the East End, beyond a few fleeting references such as the interesting discussion of a party worker's role in boosting the lodger vote at

Mile End East, or the analysis of party efforts to woo costermongers and other potential political intermediaries. The Primrose League is mentioned, but its relative strength in different parts of the East End, and hence whether it may have reinforced the political influence of church visitors, is not explored. Similarly, we learn nothing about the growing use of 'lady canvassers' by both parties in the late nineteenth century, though these too may have reinforced the influence Brodie detects at work across the 'respectable' East End, particularly if the Conservatives made better use of this electioneering weapon than their rivals. But then in truth we do not hear much about the relative strength of the parties at all – not even in the crucial field of registration work. And it is not just parties that are largely ignored in this study: so too is the whole world of public politics. Perhaps because the emphasis is on the conservatism of a well-to-do, privatised working class, there is little discussion of the rough-and-tumble of late Victorian and Edwardian popular politics. This is a pity because it would be interesting to know if election meetings were less common in Brodie's more affluent, home-centred districts, such as Mile End, than in the old, central districts, such as St George's and Whitechapel. It would also be interesting to know whether meetings were more popular among Liberals than Conservatives, and whether their importance declined over time. But then more domestic forms of political communication, such as the election leaflet and the politicised local press, are also written out of the story.

Brodie wants to offer an explanatory model which rejects the current fashion for emphasising political discourse and the active role of party in the construction of political identities. But while his frustration with the constructivists' indifference to questions of reception is understandable, Brodie falls into the opposite trap of ignoring the world of formal politics altogether. State policy, political issues and party rhetoric are all treated as matters of little consequence compared with the micro-level social interactions said to shape electoral choice in the East End. This preference for sociological over political explanation leaves many key issues unexplained. For instance, we are frequently told that although the Conservative vote was more stable at Parliamentary elections, progressive voters consistently turned out in greater numbers in municipal elections. Strikingly, in both cases only progressive voting behaviour is explained. At the Parliamentary level we are alerted to the social influence of church visiting, while at the municipal level we are told that Liberal voters polled in greater numbers because they felt strong loyalty to the Radical clubs that were so active in local politics. This is an interesting hypothesis, though one that requires considerably more work on the relationship between voter turnout and candidate type. Did Liberal 'outsiders' poll much worse than 'locals'? Did club officials always outpoll other Liberals? Why did church influence not create similar loyalties among Conservatives?

However, even if one accepts Brodie's arguments about the differential propensity to vote at local and national level, this still leaves three major questions unanswered. First, why was the Conservative vote so stable when the electorate was so shifting (Brodie estimates that up to a third of the electorate would be new voters at any given general election)? Second, has Brodie really disproved John Davis's original argument that Conservatives polled more heavily in Parliamentary than local elections because they were successfully mobilised around issues such as empire, Ireland, war and protection – issues which appeared to have little relevance to municipal politics?⁽⁵⁾ Third, why could radical clubs apparently mobilise support for candidates at local elections, but not national? For Brodie, this is simply a question of the limits of personal influence, but perhaps political factors were also at work. We have long known that many London Radicals were dissatisfied with aspects of national Liberal politics, and with the cliques controlling Liberal organisation across much of the capital. Were such issues really irrelevant to the vitality of Liberalism as an electoral force in parts of the East End?

There are, in short, significant problems with Brodie's determination to ignore ideas and activism in favour of focusing narrowly on micro-level social and cultural contexts. This approach is ultimately no less problematic than histories which interpret the so-called 'linguistic turn' as a licence to stop worrying about old-fashioned issues like social structure and the franchise. In this work Brodie has developed new and compelling methodologies for investigating the social bases of politics, but perhaps, because his grasp of the social is so strong, he leans too heavily on purely sociological explanations of politics. The result is a study which, far from exploring the reception of ideas, treats ideas as all but irrelevant – only context matters.

Some middle ground, combining the strengths of Brodie's non-determinist sociology with the insights of discourse-centred 'new political history', would seem preferable, and would surely generate more compelling historical explanations. Such an approach might also allow working people a more sophisticated political consciousness than they are accorded in *The Politics of the Poor*.

Notes

1. J. Davis, 'Slums and the Vote, 1867–1890', *Historical Research*, 65 (1991), 375–88; and J. Davis and D. Tanner, 'The Borough Franchise after 1867', *Historical Research*, 69 (1996), 306–27. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Paul Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour: the Struggle for London, 1885–1914*, (1967). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Alan Mayne, *The Imagined Slum: Newspaper Representation in Three Cities, 1870–1914*, (1993). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Hugh McLeod, *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian England: How Secular was the Working Class?*, (Bangor, 1993); S. C. Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark, c.1880–1939*, (Oxford, 1999). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. John Davis, *Reforming London: the London Government Problem, 1855–1900*, (Oxford, 1988). [Back to \(5\)](#)

I thank Dr Lawrence for his positive comments, and I am happy to accept the review. I would just note, as stated in the book, that my central aim, in addition to rescuing the East End from simple ideas of 'slum conservatism', was to show how very localised social structures and personal relationships, often ignored, might influence political results, and not necessarily to explain the entire make-up of East End politics in the period.

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