London Lives: Poverty, Crime and the Making of a Modern City, 1690–1800

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Author: Tim Hitchcock

Robert B. Shoemaker

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At the start of this century, Tim Hitchcock and Bob Shoemaker undertook the digitisation of the surviving editions of the [Old Bailey Proceedings](#) [2], with the object to create a searchable resource in a form accessible to the public and free at the point of use. Last year, 2015, was the anniversary of the launch of the first database in 2005. The project has since expanded to include the Sessions Papers up to 1913, a run of the Ordinary of Newgate's Accounts from 1676 to 1772, and complementary resources, including [Connected Histories](#) [3], [18thConnect](#) [4], [Locating London's Past](#) [5], and the sister database [London Lives, 1690–1800: Crime, Poverty and Social Policy in the Metropolis](#) [6]. It is material from these digitised resources, and particularly from the last, that underpin this important and timely study. *London Lives: Poverty, Crime and the Making of a Modern City, 1690–1800*, is a big book at 413 pages of text; wrought in intense detail, extensively referenced and embedded solidly in the scholarship, this book is Hitchcock and Shoemaker's statement on the fluid and interconnecting developments in social policy which characterised the metropolis in the 18th century. The book draws together a multitude of fragments from criminals and vagrants, from respectable Londoners, from the magistracy and their constables, from the members of the parish vestries and reformers, and from the myriad humanity of the metropolis. These fragments enmesh to tell the story of how elite and middle class Londoners responded to what were perceived as the pressing issues of poverty, crime, vagrancy and disorder on their doorsteps. In turn, we see how plebeian Londoners reacted to and resisted the changes, innovations and controls which often rode roughshod over their lives. Not only did poor Londoners find individual and group strategies to negotiate such demands from above, but, according to Hitchcock and Shoemaker, they contributed directly to the evolution of the institutions and policies with which they were forced to engage (p. 17).

The book is chronologically organised, charting the changing forms of London's social policy and the means by which its elites manipulated it to their own ends. Whilst ostensibly there is a thematic strand running through the chapters, the temporal perspective is crucial and many themes reoccur across the chapters. A substantial introduction outlines the existing historiography of the 18th-century metropolis, which they argue, has tended to shy away from the forces that shaped London itself, in this case 'crime and poverty, and

their institutional *doppelgängers* of criminal justice and poor relief' (p. 9). Key to the introduction is the authors' attempt to position the study in relation to pauper and criminal agency, by drawing particularly on the theoretical perspectives of Michel de Certeau. Like de Certeau, the authors argue that 'agency' needs to be framed by everyday life, seeing the 'tactics' and 'strategies' adopted by the poor, as their means to negotiate society and its structures (pp. 19–20).⁽¹⁾ They rightly describe agency as a 'slippery and uncertain term', and there are points in the book where the use of the term agency sits a little awkwardly, which I'll come back to below. The methodology section outlines the collective ways in which the authors have worked with the archives, and the relationship between more 'conventional' research and the digitised data. It also explains the innovative approach to the presentation of the historical evidence to the reader. The authors note, 'it was conceived and written in the hopes that it would be read online and onscreen with the archive of lives and documents that underpins its conclusions directly (and freely) available to the reader' (p. 25).

The bulk of the book is made up of six chapters, chronologically moving from the 1690s to an obvious point of 1789. An epilogue focuses on the final decade and the turn of the new century. Chapter two, 'Beggarman, thief: 1690–1713', explores the growth of the city from the second half of the 17th century, and the apparent problems that arise from a swelling population. The responses to the perceived growth of disorder which came with a rising population would lead to new prescriptions for poverty and poor relief and new measures against crime. These changes, following the reformation of policy which had emerged from the 1688 Revolution, realigned the relationship between the poor, the justices of the peace and parish officials. They also led to the increasing differentiation between the 'deserving' settled poor and the 'undeserving' mobile poor, who were bound for the workhouse or the house of correction. Moreover, the renewal of the Society for the Reformation of Manners from the late 1690s and early 1700s aided local authorities and more comfortably-off residents in the identification of disorderly Londoners. However, these decades also saw the introduction of a rewards systems and information became a valuable currency both in the Reformation of Manners campaign and in local policing. As the authors conclude, 'the poor could take advantage of the increasingly mercenary approach to policing, in which anyone could make an information and obtain a reward' (p. 69).

The main focus of chapter three is on 'Protest and resistance, 1713–1731', starting with the accession of the Hanoverian monarchy and the advent of Georgian London. In this period London underwent one of the many crime waves which it would be subject to throughout the century. This one was linked to severe frosts and poor harvests, as well as the impact of demobilisation after the end of the War of the Spanish Succession. The period has been characterised as one of significant conflict. There were protests in the 1710s, with crowds adopting the language of Jacobitism to attack the new King; the Riot Act was passed in 1715, and the Transportation Act was passed in 1718. The venal and corrupt thief-taker Jonathan Wild would capitalise on that Act to threaten those who returned from America and pocket the £40 reward. The 'bloody code' was shaped and expanded by an aggressive government responding to criminality which, at least in part, grew out of their social policy decision making. As this chapter shows, a 'culture of defiance' to the 'bloody code' and its agents – the magistrates, the constables, the Reformation of Manners, the parish bureaucracies – can also be charted. Highway robbers and other criminals subverted the rewards system, resisted the constables of the Reformation Manners Campaign, and took advantage of the voracious popular appetite for crime stories.

Chapter four examines the relationship between the poor and the vestries, between 1731 and 1748. This chapter reveals the huge number of women who comprised workhouse populations, but also the patchwork quality of welfare and relief that many plebeian Londoners had to resort to in order to survive. Attempts to deal with problems of poverty, and concerns about gin-drinking and crime, resulted in a re-constitution of local government. However, as this chapter demonstrates, parish governance did not go unchallenged and opposition came from householders and the 'respectable' poor, as well as plebeian Londoners. Criminals, like those involved in the Black Boy Alley Gang, used the law and developed strategies with the help of the lawyers who were increasingly involved as counsel for the defence. Moreover, the communities embedded in the clusters of streets around Black Boy Alley, in the face of stigmatisation by the authorities, sometimes

resisted by violence; a boon to the London press who played on public fears about street robbery with sensationalist reporting (p. 183).

Chapter five introduces a revisionism of the careers of the mid-century reformers, particularly Henry Fielding, who the authors point out, had 'a darker side' (p. 206). Starting with the mid-century crime wave which followed on from the end of war, the chapter explores the growth of prosecutions and the public visibility of highway robbers. One response to the crime wave came from the ambitious and proactive justice of the peace, Henry Fielding. This chapter presents a very different portrayal of Fielding from that provided in John Beattie's recent study, *The First English Detectives* (2012).⁽²⁾ Whilst that study presents Fielding as a pivotal figure and one who successfully created and directed a detective force (the Bow Street Runners) to deal with a significant crime problem, this study suggests that the crime problem may not have been as significant or threatening as Fielding stated. Moreover, Fielding devised solutions to the 'problems' of poverty and crime, which were ideologically shaped by his fundamental belief that the fault of poverty lay strictly with the poor. Fielding is not the only mid-18th century reformer in the authors' critical lens. Jonas Hanway of the Marine Society and Thomas Coram of the Foundling Hospital are also shown to be much less sympathetic to the poor than has been generally portrayed. For example, the section on 'London's Lost Children' explores the General Reception Order of 1756 that charged the Hospital to accept all children offered to it under the age of two months. Over five years 14,982 babies were admitted to the hospital at the cost of £500,000. Between June 1758 and September 1760, 81 per cent of the 7,000 babies admitted died, most aged under one. As the authors comment, 'The most substantial effect of this essentially mercantilist attempt to break a perceived pattern of intergenerational poverty was simply thousands of dead children' (p. 260).

Chapter six takes us up to the 1760s and into the 1770s, and another crime wave with the end of the Seven Year War in 1763; and a sea change in policing and punishment. This was not a sudden break with the past, but by the 1760s the strategies and innovations devised by Henry Fielding, would be put into aggressive practice by his half-brother John. As this chapter shows however, plebeian agency was transformed in this period into more coherent and organised protest. The industrial protests which marked the 1760s, of the silk weavers and coal heavers of East London, take a central place here. As Hitchcock and Shoemaker rightly point out, the concurrence of industrial and political protest at this time was far from coincidental. Protestors shared a common language and there is evidence of sympathy between the different groups. Moreover, both groups of protestors were engaged in conflict with John Fielding and his runners, who was waging war on the 'mob'. The riots and protests, and the authorities' strategies of policing, prosecution and penalty which were used to quell them, were indicative of a growing sense of grievance. As the authors note, 'a large body of Londoner's was left nursing a grievance against criminal justice, a fact which would have significant consequences for attitudes towards the law over the next two decades' (p. 285). One of the most damaging consequences is the main subject of chapter seven, 'The State in Chaos, 1776–1789'. The Gordon Riots is explored in the context of chaos in the penal system. According to the authors, long term mass imprisonment contributed to the creation of 'new communities of resistance' which transformed the Gordon Riots, into an 'organised proto-revolutionary series of attacks on the prisons of London' (p. 333). The resistance to the imposition of official initiatives was the culmination of decades of smaller attempts to subvert authority with an unleashed anger that brought the metropolis close to the brink of rebellion and revolution. Defendants were becoming more vocal and demanding proper representation, paupers found ways to exploit the workhouse and the poor relief system, and some offenders, faced with transportation to the new penal colony in New South Wales, refused the Royal Pardon, preferring to die than be sent into the unknown. As the epilogue argues, by the 1780s and 1790s plebeian Londoners had a range of tactics and strategies which they might use to negotiate and challenge authority.

It is impossible to convey the breadth of this book in the snapshot chapter summaries that I've provided here. In each substantial chapter a range of themes contribute to the overall argument, which at times makes it quite a weighty read. On the other hand, the authors very effectively draw the themes together, and there is a clear exposition of argument throughout. What I found very interesting in the book was the underlying anger. And I think 'anger' is the right word. This isn't a splenetic anger, but rather a quiet anger that builds

throughout the book to reveal the ways in which the 18th-century elite gamed the system against the poor. In drawing the connections between poverty, crime and social policy, the authors make an impassioned plea to recognise the agency of plebeian Londoners which echoes the earlier work of Linebaugh and Hay.⁽³⁾ The middling sorts do not get off lightly either, as illustrated most effectively in chapter five, and particularly in the harrowing account of Coram's Foundling Hospital. Indeed, the book paints a picture of a tense metropolis – one that was riven by class tensions with an increasingly politically active middling sorts who were determined to have their slice of the action and to shape social policy.

The marshalling of evidence from ordinary Londoners about the ways in which they interacted with a system that was stacked against them at every step is impressive. As the book demonstrates, riots and protests, letter-writing, and violent resistance, were only the most obvious ways of fighting the system. However, paupers and criminals found other ways of subverting poor relief policy, the workhouse and the criminal law – as the authors note they played the system, and over the course of the century became increasingly sophisticated in their 'strategies' and 'tactics' (p. 413). Moreover, the book conveys the overlapping and blurred boundaries between the poor and the criminal, reinforcing the view from *Albion's Fatal Tree*, that 'we found little evidence of a morally endorsed popular culture here and a deviant subculture there'.⁽⁴⁾ In contrast, as the authors note, there is evidence for 'widespread tolerance of pauper strategies' (p. 240). And it is clear that much of this tolerance extended to activities designated as criminal. Coming back to the paradigmatic role of agency, there are times when those paupers and criminals might have been more vocal in the book. Despite the authors' intentions to put plebeian Londoners at the centre of the book, the understandable focus on the iniquities of the system sometimes overshadowed the voices of the poor and criminal. The lives of plebeian Londoners undoubtedly drive the book, so I wondered if this was a product of reading the hardcopy version of this book rather than the online one, as the authors originally intended? Does the ability to navigate between the text and the documents much more effectively capture the vibrancy and rhythm of the plebeian voices that we find in the Old Bailey Proceedings and other documents?

Ultimately, what this book shows us is how hard life was for poor or even less well-off Londoners in the 18th century; with no formal or joined up state support, survival was based on charity, philanthropy, and a patchwork of welfare that was often dependent on the 'story' that you could spin, which might buy you some support for a short time. Or you used illegal means, often as part of a makeshift economy, where recourse to criminal activity was a necessary adjunct to survival. Or you were drawn to recidivism and criminal confederacy, a strategy that was consciously adopted by some, but for others was a product of coercion, desire, greed, excitement, anger or vulnerability. Thus *London Lives* is a damning account of a metropolitan social policy which repeatedly failed the poor, and criminalised them through a raft of measures which targeted activities which the poor often resorted to through desperation (vagrancy, gin-drinking, prostitution, rioting). In demonstrating the way in which the stark divisions between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' were ideologically embedded in 18th-century reform and practice, the book is timely reminder of the very real impact on the poor.

Notes

1. M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA, 1988).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. M. Beattie, *The First English Detectives: The Bow Street Runners and the Policing of London, 1750–1840* (Oxford, 2012).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. P. Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1991); D. Hay et al., 'Property, Authority and the Criminal Law', in D. Hay et al, *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth Century England* (London, 1975).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Albion's Fatal Tree*, p. 14.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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Criminal Historian

<http://www.criminalhistorian.com/category/book-review/> [8]

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