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Misery or the production of misery: defining sweated labour in 1890

'Do you think any good will be done by this inquiry into sweating?' we have asked again and again.

The answer of the sweater and the sweated is the same:

'No; the evidence has been so contradictory.'

'You might as well set me to give an opinion on politics as them lords to give an opinion on sweating,' a woman said with supreme contempt. 'Why, one of them actually thought we used machines as finishers; he didn't seem to understand if we'd machines we'd be machinists.'

Toilers in London (1889)¹

In her 1986 essay on the characteristics of the sweated trades at the end of the last century, Jenny Morris points out that 'sweating' is 'a rather unsatisfactory analytical term'.² I would agree, but I shall argue in this paper that the imprecision in the term 'sweating' is not just a scholarly crux, but that it arose in the 1880s and 1890s in Britain as reformers attacked a popularly identified social problem, and as those opposed to reform (and others who knew better than both groups) attempted to enforce their different understandings. The characteristics of sweating which Morris accepts ('very low wages, long hours and insanitary working conditions') do not necessarily constitute the most historically significant meaning of 'sweating', but they certainly convey the sense of the term accepted by the dominant groups after 1890. Indeed, Morris's own choice of analytical category, 'characteristics', with its positivist connotations compared to, say, 'the nature of sweating', is a legacy of the struggle for (and over) understanding in those years. For the attention given to the sweated trades during the late Victorian–Edwardian years, the effort to define or, more importantly, *not* to define 'sweating' marks an important moment in the ideological history of capital.³

¹ [M. Harkness], *Toilers in London, or Inquiries Concerning Female Labour in the Metropolis*, by the 'British Weekly' Commissioners, edited by the Author of 'Out of Work', etc. (1889), 218–19.

² J. Morris, 'The characteristics of sweating: the late nineteenth-century London and Leeds

tailoring trade' in A. V. John (ed.), *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1800–1918* (Oxford, 1986), 96.

³ I am interested here in that particular set of historical determinations arising from the new dominance of finance capital and the export of capital, but I recognize that sweating was

The ambiguity of the modern accounts of the sweated trades,⁴ the difficulty they seem to have in defining or specifying 'sweating' as an object of scrutiny at the turn of the century, is shared by the witnesses called before the Lords Select Committee on the Sweating System from 1888 to 1890, and, finally, by the imposed indeterminacy of the committee's *Final Report*. While the Select Committee was certainly part of that conjunctural crisis of the 1880s 'which at last enabled contemporaries to perceive the depth and extent of London poverty',⁵ its immediate occasion seems to have been the interest produced by a *Report* submitted in September 1887 to the Board of Trade by John Burnett, the Board's Labour Correspondent, on the sweating system in the East End.⁶ Burnett's *Report* provoked various forms of public outcry: Arnold White, an activist and writer on social questions, led a deputation to the Home Secretary on 15 December 1887 to protest against the immigration of foreign paupers,⁷ and there was a meeting in Brick Lane, Whitechapel, the following February, endorsing the *Report*, deploring the 'system' and condemning the government's persistent neglect.⁸ There was also a well-attended demonstration staged by the Social Democratic Federation in Hyde Park on Sunday, 22 July 1888.⁹ But by then Lord Kenry, Earl of Dunraven and Mount-Earl, had moved a resolution in the House of Lords to appoint a Select Committee on the Sweating System, which held its first meeting on 16 March 1888. By May the Earl of Onslow and Lord Clinton, committee members, were visiting sweatshops in Whitechapel and Mile End (enquiring perhaps about the use of machines by 'finishers'),¹⁰ and the committee was interviewing witnesses. These ranged from an individual sweated cabinet-maker like Thomas Joliffe to John Blundell Maple, MP, of Maple's, the London furniture store; from James Monro, Congregationalist minister, Bethnal Green, to the Revd William Adamson, vicar of Old Ford, Bow; from Charles Booth and Beatrice Potter (later Webb), social investigators, to Solomon Franks, tailor's presser, and A. J. Felz, tailor's machinist. The *Index of the Parliamentary Reports* lists in the evidence forty-five attempts at a definition of 'sweating',¹¹ and there is much discussion of whether sweating was indeed a 'system' at all. Commentators in the monthlies also differed as to the definition of sweating or as to whether it could be said to be in any way systemic. As we shall see, this universal indeterminacy (among non-socialist

overdetermined by location, by the traditional structures of specific trades, by metropolitan-provincial economic relations and other determinants of the casual labour market, as well as by the conjunctural crisis of the 1880s: 'A severe cyclical depression . . . ; the structural decline of certain of the older central industries; the chronic shortage of working-class housing . . . ; and the emergence of socialism and various forms of collectivism' (G. Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (1984), 106-11, 281).

⁴ D. Bythell, *The Sweated Trades: Outwork in Nineteenth Century Britain* (1978); J. A. Schmiechen, *Sweated Industries and Sweated Labour: The London Clothing Trades, 1860-1914* (Urbana, Ill., 1984); J. Morris, *Women*

Workers and the Sweated Trades: The Origins of Minimum Wage Legislation (Aldershot, 1986).

⁵ *ibid.*, 152.

⁶ B.P.P., *Report to the Board of Trade on the Sweating System at the East End of London by the Labour Correspondent of the Board, 1887*, LXXXIX, 253-72.

⁷ 'The sweating system in the East End', *The Times* (16 December 1887), 12.

⁸ *The Times* (6 February 1888), 9.

⁹ *ibid.* (23 July 1888), 10.

¹⁰ *ibid.* (5 May 1888), 7.

¹¹ B.P.P., *Fourth Report of the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Sweating System*, 'Index to the Evidence', 1889, xiv, part two, 431-2; references in my text to the evidence will be given by year, volume and question number.

commentators)¹² is significant, masking (as in modern studies) the historical meaning of sweating by the insistence of its effort to understand it empirically. Under the polite and often penetrating questioning of the noble lords, individual witnesses in different trades placed their emphases differently: many told of how recently sweating had developed in fiercely competitive outwork (1888: xx, 2257, 2568, 3801); many, including Arnold White, spoke of the impact on the labour market of the 'unrestricted influx of foreign paupers called "greeners"' (1888: xx, 411); and others told of how little capital was required to set up as a sweater (1888: xx, 1775) and of the impact of the sewing machine (1889: xiv, 25632, 27690). Some witnesses spoke of how sweating prevented workers combining in unions (1888: xx, 704, 711) and described the techniques of 'forcing' the work (1888: xx, 3495, 3554). Yet others addressed more complex matters like the characteristic subdivision of labour and deskilling (1888: xx, 1781; 1889: xiv, 27694; 1888: xx, 5365), subcontracting (1888: xxi, 11460) and the fall of wages (1888: xx, 6070).

The evidence placed before the House of Lords Select Committee over the two years was various and voluminous, and the task of reporting to the House was a large one for the chair, Lord Dunraven, who had been one of the most assiduous and probing inquisitors. *The Times's* editorial after the committee's first, interim, report mused: 'It is curious to see what different definitions are given by the witnesses before the Committee', and it went on to assert that it was impossible, with so many different and discordant accounts, to arrive at a single judgement on the sweating system as a whole (20 September 1888, p. 7). Several incidents indicate division within the committee: when Mr McCarthy, a witness from the Stevedores Union, suggested that there should be legislation to limit 'the inordinate profit of the masters', the Earl of Limerick objected that it would be necessary to clear the room if this class of evidence went on; he thought it went outside the reference of the committee. Lord Dunraven, in the chair, differed with him, but the room was cleared and 'their Lordships remained for some time in deliberation'.¹³ Earlier, Dunraven had differed strongly with Colonel Du Piat Taylor CB, manager of the East and West India Docks, called as a witness, over whether it constituted a threat for Colonel Taylor to state during wage negotiations with the dockers that 'last year in the East End he could have got men for 2d an hour'.¹⁴ It becomes increasingly clear that, for Lord Dunraven at least, the evidence garnered by the committee had made some of the issues surrounding sweating less indeterminate. After fifteen months' further inquiry, on 25 February 1890, it was announced in *The Times* that 'a serious hitch, amounting to a deadlock', had occurred in

¹² Marx had no difficulty in detecting the forms of the emerging sweating system in 1867: a 'hierarchically organized system of exploitation and oppression . . . has two fundamental forms':

On the one hand piece-wages make it easier for parasites to impose themselves between the capitalist and the wage-labourer, thus giving rise to the 'sub-letting' of labour. . . . In England, this system is called, characteristically, the 'sweating system'. On the other hand, piece-wages allow the capitalist to make a contract for so much per piece with the most

important worker . . . at a price for which this man himself undertakes the enlisting and the payment of his assistants. Here the exploitation of the worker by capital takes place through the medium of the exploitation of one worker by another.

(Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. by B. Fowkes (Harmondsworth, 1976), 695. See also 600-4, 1070-1.) What Marx does not mention is the subdivision of labour which the second form also entails.

¹³ *The Times* (6 December 1888), 13.

¹⁴ *ibid.* (26 November 1888), 4.

the Sweating Committee, which had met the day before to consider Lord Dunraven's draft report. In fact, Lord Dunraven's report had been unanimously rejected by the ten committee members sitting, Dunraven alone voting 'Content'. Then, after a four-week adjournment during which Lord Dunraven was 'exempted from further attendance', the committee met on 17 April under its new chair, Lord Derby, to consider a replacement draft report prepared by Lord Thring.¹⁵ This became the basis for the Select Committee's *Final Report* to the House of Lords. The differences between these two reports show that not only was Lord Dunraven prepared, in various ways, to pronounce on, to *decide*, some of the indeterminacies which had been raised in evidence, but that the Thring-based *Final Report* furiously sought to restore them.

A writer in the *New Review* explains the sequence of events surrounding the reports in more detail than does *The Times*. Dunraven's draft, informally circulated in the committee as early as July 1889 was first officially discussed on 5 August, but on Lord Thring's motion consideration was postponed. It was not until the new session of parliament, six months later, on 24 February 1890, that the Dunraven report was considered by the whole Select Committee. The *New Review* writer points out that 'some influence had been at work'; it was rejected after two hours' discussion.¹⁶ Lord Thring's substitute report was brought forward seven weeks later, but it had been begun, as we might suspect, in the period before the rejection of Lord Dunraven's.

One powerful 'influence' had been the witness of eighteen months earlier, Beatrice Potter. 'Dined with Lord Thring,' she writes in her diary for 9 February 1890, 'to meet Lord Monkswell [another member of the committee] and discuss Lord Dunraven's draft report, and help draft an opposition.' She describes Thring as 'a dried-up little lawyer, upper-middle-class in origin', and adds:

His views are strictly economic, a bias against sensationalism, against state interference; in fact the high and dry orthodoxy of 1850. The whole 'Sweating' business he regards as so much 'gas'. But with the present combustible state of public opinion safety-valves must be provided.¹⁷

After further quotation illustrating Lord Thring's utter cynicism about Dunraven, trade unions and the 'evils' of sweating, Potter describes their reading over and recasting his notes, all in the interest of 'cutting the ground from under Dunraven's remedies' (323). Potter justifies to herself her participation in this plot (again, some two weeks prior to Dunraven's presenting his report to the Select Committee) by her desire to be 'of even little use as a reforming agency', and so to prepare the ground for her own commentary on the two reports, to be published in the *Nineteenth Century*. *My Apprenticeship* records another, 'uncomfortable', dinner with Lord Thring to discuss his draft report, 'three pages to Dunraven's seventy':

¹⁵ B.P.P. (1890), *op. cit.*, *Fifth Report* (1890), xvii, 358, 359; this volume contains the *Final Report*, Lord Dunraven's draft report, and Lord Thring's draft report, which will be cited by volume and page number.

¹⁶ Anon., 'Sweating: the two reports', *New*

Review, 11 (1890), 483-4; not even the editors of the *Wellesley Index* have been able to penetrate this writer's anonymity.

¹⁷ N. and J. MacKenzie (eds), *The Diary of Beatrice Webb* (1982), 1, 322.

it begins with my definition of sweating as certain conditions of employment; expressly omitting all reference to sub-contract, sub-division of labour, machinery, foreign immigration, to which Dunraven has devoted some twenty pages. . . . Altogether, though it is utterly ineffective, the report is sound so far as it goes, and will serve as a foundation for my own proposals.¹⁸

I do not want to comment on Beatrice Potter's conception of a political practice, 'getting' her ideas 'inserted in the Lord's Report',¹⁹ nor, indeed, the ethics of that practice. Rather, I want simply to note what 'influence' had made the *Report's* rejection a foregone conclusion and the direction she and Lord Thring had given to the substitute report. The anonymous writer in the *New Review* notes some superficial similarities of organization in Dunraven's and the *Final Report*,²⁰ and Lord Dunraven himself, in his speech when the *Report* was presented to the House of Lords, sardonically remarked that he 'was glad to see again the features of my own child', although his draft had 'suffered considerably, it is true, at the traditionally cruel hands of a step-mother':

I fear the Committee became somewhat demoralised by the nature of the evidence brought before them. They appear to have become bitten and saturated with the *virus* of the sweating system. In fact, the system of middlemen and sub-contractors is well illustrated by what has taken place with regard to the Report. . . . The noble and learned Lord Thring took out the original contract. He obtained the material – well, perhaps the least said about that the better – did a little 'knifing' himself and then sub-let the contract to certain members of the Committee, who have been content to work under him, and to modestly blush unseen.²¹

'I should like to express my compliments', Dunraven said, 'if I only knew to whom those compliments were due' (col. 286); he would seem to have known full well that his compliments were due in a large part to Miss Beatrice Potter.

The Economist, as might be expected, welcomed the *Final Report*: 'The public is now in possession of a statement of the case delivered calmly, and on reliable authority, and benefit must naturally accrue from the fact that the public conscience has been troubled.' Pleased that the committee did not recommend 'any novel or ingenious panacea . . . any legislation of the heroic type', *The Economist's* perception of the 'natural' was such that it insisted on the naturalness of the army of unemployed:

It must not be forgotten that if, in conjunction with other forms of competition [the flooded labour market] tends to cheapen labour, it also tends to cheapen the products

¹⁸ B. Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (Cambridge, 1979), 326–7. This stage must represent the first draft of Thring's report, to which the writer refers in the *New Review*, *op. cit.*, 484.

¹⁹ Webb, *Diary*, *op. cit.*, 1, 327; whether or not Lenin's later dismissal of the Webbs as 'solid scholars (and "solid" opportunists)' was just (V. I. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*, trans. by S. V. and P. Utechin (Oxford, 1963), 88), these events seem to bear out Ben Tillett's assessment of Beatrice Potter's behaviour during the 1889

dock strike: 'She was young, clever, much petted by the intellectuals of the older generation, undoubtedly sincere, anxious to help, but somewhat condescending.' B. Tillett, *Memories and Reflections* (1931), 109.

²⁰ Anon., 'The two reports', *op. cit.*, 485.

²¹ B.P.P., *op. cit.*, *Debates* (9 June 1890), CCCXLI, cols 286–7; further references to the debate in the Lords will be given in the text by column number.

of labour, and of this cheapness the working classes themselves are the first to derive the benefit, in the same way that they would be the first to suffer from the advance in prices which must ensue upon any unnatural interference with the labour market by Act of Parliament.²²

The *Saturday Review*, on the other hand, wondered at what it called the 'languid and perfunctory manner' in which the *Report* was received, attributing it to the disappointment of 'sensation-mongers'. After all, the *Saturday* pointed out, 'it tells us little that was not known before', noting that, having taken some pains to inquire into the nature of sweating, the *Report* arrives at no conclusion:

Not that any exact and comprehensive definition is needed before we begin to understand the 'sweating system'. There is no peculiarity about it; it is not a system apart; it is simply the application in certain grades of business of the universal practice (at one time counted a virtue) of making the sharpest and most profitable bargain that can possibly be contrived. . . . The sweating which the Lords' Committee had to consider is, in other words, the production of manufactured commodities at the lowest possible price; the lowest possible price for work being what, in the superabundance of labour, the manufacturer can screw the labourer down to.²³

Only the anonymous *New Reviewer*, who must have consulted Dunraven, notes the way the *Final Report* jumbles and obscures the evidence of witnesses. Whereas Dunraven, following the example of the recent Parnell Commission, had summed up as he went along, there is no running commentary in the *Final Report*, with the occasional exception when a view presented coincided with the *Report's* final judgements. The *New Reviewer* also remarks on the *Final Report's* omission of Lord Dunraven's comments on sweating as influenced by subcontracting, competition and immigration, and its ignoring as well 'the native movements of labour'. On bootmaking, the writer comments, 'The Committee support the manufacturers' view, and Lord Dunraven apparently accepts the version of the unemployed.'²⁴

Yet Beatrice Potter, when her *Nineteenth Century* article appeared, was to assert that 'those who ardently desire reform see before them a concise document containing sound statement and helpful suggestion'.²⁵ Remaining silent about her part in its drafting,²⁶ she proceeds to analyse the *Final Report*, 'and to define and elaborate the plan of campaign'. She notes that 'at the outset the Committee are met with the difficulties of definition', and

the popular and picturesque name – the *sweating system* . . . is conspicuous by its absence from the terse propositions drawn up as the conclusions of the Select

²² 'The report of the sweating committee', *The Economist*, Monthly Trade Supplement (10 May 1890), 4–5; in its editorial for 11 June 1890, during the debate in the House of Lords, *The Times* concurred: 'We do not say that law can do nothing to relieve the sweated poor: but prudence and self-control can do infinitely more' (9).

²³ 'The sweating report', *Saturday Review*, LXIX (10 May 1890), 558.

²⁴ Anon., 'The two reports', *op. cit.*, 486, 487.

²⁵ B. Potter, 'The Lords and the sweating system', *Nineteenth Century*, xxvii (June 1890), 885.

²⁶ Although he was 'indistinctly heard' when he 'protested against the personal imputation' (*The Times* (11 June 1890), 6), Lord Thring acknowledged to the Lords the assistance he had received; he suppressed mention of Potter's influence (*Debates*, col. 451).

Committee. They speak of *sweating*, but they drop the word *system*, and by this significant omission they tacitly deny that these evils are co-extensive with, or peculiar to, any one form of industrial organization.

(886)

Concurring, not surprisingly, with the *Report's* diagnosis of the evils of sweating as an unduly low rate of wages, excessive hours of labour and the unsanitary state of the houses in which the work is carried on, she argues in support of the committee's 'courageous but unpopular' dismissal of the most commonly alleged causes of sweating: middlemen, machinery, subdivision of labour and foreign immigration. Her critique of the *Final Report* uses 'the comparative method': 'in order to discover what constitutes disease, we must compare the diseased body with the relatively healthy organism' (i.e. 'those industries admittedly free from the evils of sweating'), and this, she claims, allows her to dismiss the 'deep-rooted popular fallacy – that sweating is caused by the introduction of profit-making middlemen, machinery and subdivision of labour', and then allows her her resonant, much-quoted aphorism: 'The sweater is, in fact, the whole nation.'²⁷

But there is much more to be said about the contrast between the two reports. Dunraven comments shrewdly in his speech to the House of Lords:

The general impression which the *Report* conveys is . . . that with the exception of sanitation the people themselves are mainly to blame for the circumstances of their lives, and that such matters as the abuse of sub-contracting, intense competition of capital, and the influx of a certain class of foreign labour, and other matters of that kind, have little or nothing to do with the sweating system. I should gather from the *Report* that, in the opinion of the Committee, sweating does exist, if by sweating you mean a condition of misery; but that a sweating system – that is, a system of manufacture which produces, or tends to produce, this misery – does not exist.

(cols 284–5)

Dunraven insisted that while Potter's evidence was valuable, it ought to have been 'balanced and weighed against the evidence of other people of greater experience', the *New Reviewer* agreeing that 'the Committee put a somewhat different complexion to that of Lord Dunraven upon the evidence of Miss Potter'.²⁸ As Dunraven pointed out:

Out of a total number of 86 witnesses who spoke upon [sub-contracting], 83 were of opinion that some or other of the evils they complained of were due to the existence of unnecessary middlemen, and to sub-contracting. On the other side were three witnesses, Miss Potter, Mr Maple, and the Factory Inspector of Sheffield.

(cols 291–2)

Indeed, comparing the different versions of one of the paragraphs shows that Thring rewrote Dunraven (and, one assumes, Potter rewrote Thring) simply to emphasize that Miss Potter 'contends that the worst cases of sweating occur where there is no sub-contract', and that 'in Miss Potter's opinion pauper immigration has no effect on

²⁷ B. Potter, 'The Lords', *op. cit.*, 886–93.

²⁸ Col. 299; Anon., 'The two reports', *op. cit.*, 487.

tailoring for, in busy times, machinists and pressers make their own terms' (*Final Report*, xvii: 262, 263). Potter's assumptions, like those of the majority on the Lords Select Committee, inevitably lead to the continuing treatment of sweating by historians as 'the special problem of certain types of town or industrial area rather than as a central structural feature of Victorian capitalism from beginning to end'.²⁹

For again, the *Final Report* differs from Lord Dunraven's primarily in its refusal to admit that sweating is a system; the *Report* is 'fragrant', as Arnold White wrote to *The Times*, 'with the frankincense of *laissez-faire*'.³⁰ In his speech to the Lords, Dunraven asked the House to concentrate on the conditions and methods of production and manufacture, insisting that 'it is the duty of Parliament to address itself with a strong determination to find a remedy, not only for the unsanitary conditions, but also for the condition of manufacture, which in itself is vicious' (col. 285). 'All of these things'—and he listed hours of labour, wages, food, sanitation, etc.—'make up a picture—a result of our 19th century civilization and of our manufacturing age' (cols 283–4). His chief criticisms of the *Report* were that it erred 'in respect of the effect of the abuse of sub-contracting . . . in respect of the effect of excessive competition among employers, and . . . in respect of the effect of foreign immigration'. 'It is faulty, in fact', charges the Earl of Dunraven and Mount-Earl, in a remarkable feat of political economic insight,³¹ 'wherever capital is involved', and he concludes: 'There is not only sweating, which is another term for misery, but a sweating system, a system of manufacturing which produces misery' (col. 303).

As the *New Reviewer* points out, it is on matters such as subcontracting and subdivision of labour that the two reports divide most sharply. The wholesale revision of the judgement (and on the political level, the 'meaning') of the inquiry shows itself most blatantly in the excision of Dunraven's two pages of 'preliminary remarks', in which he attempts to make the case that though the term 'sweating system' is vague, 'it is well recognized . . . as signifying a system under which certain industries are carried on, and as implying certain conditions affecting the labour therein' (xvii, 306–7). Lord Thring and the other noble lords, on the other hand, refused 'to enter upon any discussion of the various definitions placed before us' (xvii, 298). By denying the possibility of a system, the Select Committee was able then to dismiss those relations of production such as subcontracting or subdivision of labour alleged to be characteristic of sweating, blandly asserting the opposite, that, for example, 'the middleman is the consequence, not the cause of the evil' (xvii, 299). David F. Schloss, a Fabian and one of Charles Booth's investigators, had written approvingly in *The Fortnightly* in 1887 of the sweater's ability to control unruly workers, although 'that the sweater over-acts his part is undeniable':

Where in any trade the labour employed is that of men among whom habits of order and industry are wanting, the part played by the contractor in preserving among these

²⁹ 'Editorial: British economic history and the question of work', *History Workshop*, III (Spring 1977), 3.

³⁰ *The Times* (12 May 1890), 10.

³¹ Beatrice Potter saw Dunraven as simply 'playing the card of Tory Democracy' (*Diary*, *op. cit.*, I, 323), but his biographer in the *DNB* writes of Dunraven: 'He had, as he says himself,

a "cross-bench mind", interested in politics but not in party politics' ('Quin, Windham Thomas Wyndham', *DNB: 1922–1930* (1937), 700); Arnold White, writing of the *Final Report*, said: 'Wherever it is read, the courage and patience of Lord Dunraven should not be forgotten': *The Times* (12 May 1890), 10.

men some sort of discipline and extracting from them something like a reasonable amount of exertion is one which no other class of labour-master would adequately sustain.³²

For the sweater was not simply some sort of indeterminate 'middleman', the term preferred over 'subcontractor' by Beatrice Potter and her allies. Several witnesses had made the point that while the sweater often works as hard as those he sweats, and that while the sweater is often 'a foreigner who knew no particular trade' before becoming a sweater (1889: xiv, 190), he or she is equally often the only one understanding the whole production process (1888: xx, 209). As one witness pointed out, the position of the sweater 'resembles far more the foreman of the factory than the position of middleman as understood in general commerce' (1888: xx, 542), and Schloss makes the salient point that the sweater is 'the immediate superintendent of the labour of the workpeople', 'a foreman receiving a remuneration', which most importantly 'takes the form of profit in lieu of wages'.³³

The *Final Report* also attempted to reduce the issue of cheap labour to either 'the presence of poor foreigners' (xvii, 355) or 'the inefficiency of many of the lower class of workers, early marriages, and the tendency of the residuum . . . to form a helpless community' (xvii, 299). It also had to acknowledge to some extent the impact of technological change and the subdivision of the work process arising from this. The sewing machine was probably a good example of this, and has been discussed in these terms by Sally Alexander.³⁴ Patriarchal family structures articulated the capitalist mode of production most visibly in the sweated trades; the employment of women at less than subsistence wages 'was as symptomatic of the concentration of capital and the maximization of profit within an industry as the mill girls in cotton textile mills'.³⁵ Their exploitation was enabled, as Sally Alexander shows, by both the organization of subcontracting and the dissolution of skill allowed by the subdivision of the work process and the sewing machine.³⁶ The *Final Report's* approach to the question of machinery did not make this distinction and argued that, far from being a cause of sweating, machinery was found 'in some of the largest clothing and other factories in which labour is admitted to be carried on under favourable conditions to the workers' (xvii, 299). To find exceptions to any alleged 'cause' in any particular sweated trade was to deny the possibility of a 'system'. What was most insisted on, by Tory peer and proto-Fabian reformer alike, was that sweating was not systemic; as *Fabian Tract* No. 50 put it: 'All experts agree that there

³² D. F. Schloss, 'The sweating system', *Fortnightly Review*, n.s. xxxii (1887), 849.

³³ *ibid.*, 543; D. F. Schloss, 'The sweating system', *op. cit.*, 849.

³⁴ S. Alexander, 'Women's work in nineteenth-century London: study of the years 1820-50' in J. Mitchell and A. Oakley (eds), *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* (Harmondsworth, 1976), 76. Jenny Morris demonstrates this 'revolutionary progress' in her essay, 'The characteristics of sweating', *op. cit.*, 102-19.

³⁵ S. Alexander, 'Women's work', *op. cit.*, 111, 83.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 79-81. 'From 1850 mass sewing and mass cutting revolutionized the industry technically and economically, but they meant little change in the existing small-scale organization. For the revolution in clothing differed from that in the textile trades in the amount of capital needed' (P. G. Hall, *The Industries of London* (1962), 54).

is no one industrial system co-extensive with, or invariably present in, the Sweated Trades.³⁷

And yet there clearly is: entrepreneurial capitalism as a subsector of monopoly capitalism in a period of falling profits. The persistent denial that sweating is a system forecloses that kind of historical knowledge. Charles Booth's chapter on sweating in the first volume of *Life and Labour of the People*, first published in 1889, shows again how this oversight may be constructed within a positivist problematic. Booth, having 'sought the truth', is able 'to assert without hesitation that there is no industrial system co-extensive with the evils complained of'.³⁸ Since it is 'not one but many systems with which we have to deal', he describes in succession sweating as it applies, say, to female home-workers, or to cabinet-making. Having isolated these discrete systems, he then abstracts the discrete kind of sweating in each; in the clothing trade, for example, it may be described as 'employment at second-hand', in cabinet-making, 'sub-purchase' (483). Booth's analysis is static in its positivism; the characteristics of each trade are described, a label is applied, and the investigator is content with that 'knowledge'. There is no perception of, indeed no possibility of perceiving sweating itself as a form of the work-process which manifests itself with local, external differences in these different sectors of production. To focus, like Booth, on actual, discrete 'forms of sweating' is necessarily to overlook the forms of sweating as work-process (as in the subcontracting and the subdivision of labour), as indeed a *system*. Dunraven had begun to perceive this, but his argument could not be maintained against 'scientific' analysis, not to mention sophisticated political manoeuvring.

In contrast to Booth's or Potter's, Lord Dunraven's analysis, although equally empiricist, kept pushing towards a definition of the distinctive composition of the capital of sweating in 1890. The Lords Select Committee and its chair did not theorize or analyse that capital. The counter-arguments of the 'social investigators', Booth, Potter and Schloss, and the more cynical, 'commonsense' *parti pris* of Lord Thring and his supporters, were bound to prevail on that level of empirical analysis. At the same time, the sweating system, in a conjuncture overdetermined by the export of capital, many witnesses pointed out, was undercapitalized (cf. para. 518, 1775), and hence was in a dependent relation (subcontracted) to some larger business, like Maples. Subcontracting structured sweating as competitive outwork, preventing or hindering factory inspection (27696) or unionization (704). But, most importantly, the division of labour and simplification of the individual task – 'deskilling' – was a capital-saving alternative to mechanization: 'Skill was reduced, labour costs fell, and there was a sharp increase in productivity.'³⁹The whole process was fed by a workforce of women, children, native paupers and foreign immigrants, as the witnesses pointed out (paras 411, 753 ff., 1776, 25692).

What I have been presenting might be said to be a retrospective 'definition' of sweating

³⁷ [H. W. Macrosty], 'Sweating: its cause and remedy', 2. Macrosty was a clerk in the Exchange and Audit Department of the Civil Service (E. R. Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society*, 2nd edn (1925), 157, 291).

³⁸ C. Booth, 'Sweating' in Booth (ed.), *Life*

and *Labour of the People*, 2nd edn (1889), 1, 483.

³⁹ R. Samuel, 'Workshop of the world: steam power and hand technology in mid-Victorian Britain', *History Workshop*, 111 (Spring 1977), 50.

in 1890, originating, because of the particular narrative I have traced, in the distinction which Lord Dunraven made between 'sweating' as a *condition of misery*, and 'sweating' as *the production of misery*. Thus, whereas all the voices of 1890, lords and 'finishers', journalists and 'social investigators' alike, spoke within an empiricist problematic, Dunraven's definition strives to be dialectical, to point the material articulation of sweating, notwithstanding this ideological consensus. For 'sweating' was not publicly and legally defined in 1890; rather, the *Final Report* of the Select Committee, 'delivered calmly, and on reliable authority', simply established that 'sweating' would not and could not be defined, that within the British political system measures might be taken against certain specific social ills, but that further public discussion of a system which might produce those ills was not to be heard.⁴⁰ And indeed, the narrative which I have recounted might, for many who tacitly accept this prohibition, be thought to be concluded in the co-operation for which David Schloss polemicized in 1894,⁴¹ in the successive Sweated Industries Bills which Sir Charles Dilke presented in the House from 1908,⁴² in the factory legislation for which Beatrice Potter Webb polemicized in 1904,⁴³ or finally in 1909 in the Trade Boards Act itself. But the real historical conclusion of the debate on the *Report* of the Lords' Select Committee on the Sweating System escapes the closure imposed in 1890. The debate over sweating, within and without the House of Lords, produced the possibility of, arrived at the brink of, a new sort of knowledge of the nature of the late Victorian/Edwardian capitalist social formation: the irregularities in producing the *Final Report* attest to that possibility. While sweating was not there defined as systemic, nevertheless readers of the evidence, of the successive reports, of the debates both in the House and in the press, were given a glimpse of the system, of the form of domestic entrepreneurial capital in late Victorian England as articulated within emergent monopoly capitalism.

A further, more abstract historical dimension (or 'conclusion') might be noted. There is an ideological link between the parties which, on the one hand, rejected and changed Dunraven's draft report in committee and those, on the other hand, who welcomed the report when it emerged, either simply applauding its calm 'wisdom and authority' or moving towards parliamentary action on the evils identified as the locus of sweating. Those different groups included both Lord Thring, whose views represented the 'high and dry' orthodoxy of 1850, and Beatrice Potter, whose views drew on Herbert Spencer's sociology and her own direct experience as a social investigator, as well as active Fabians like Schloss and Macrosty, and the editors of *The Times*. I am suggesting that a final historical conclusion may be drawn from the empiricism which unites ideologically these

⁴⁰ R. H. Tawney, writing of the difficulties the trades boards were to have in defining even 'tailoring', laconically concluded:

The ultimate decision on these points of interpretation lies not with the Trade Board, nor with the Board of Trade, but with the Law Courts, where the bold manufacturer who tests the Trade Board's ruling can have the nature of his occupation defined for eternity with judicial precision.

(R. H. Tawney, *The Establishment of Minimum Rates in the Tailoring Industry Under the Trade Boards Act of 1902* (1915), 3, 14.)

⁴¹ D. F. Schloss, *Methods of Industrial Remuneration*, 2nd edn (1894).

⁴² D. Sells, *British Wage Boards: A Study in Industrial Democracy* (Washington, 1939), 15-22.

⁴³ Mrs S. Webb (ed.), *The Case for the Factory Acts* (1902).

different forces, whatever their politics and social purposes, into the triumphant party in the debate on sweating. The possibility of a new sort of knowledge of the sweating *system* was foregone, in 1890, ostensibly for diverse political reasons, but also because 'system' was not comprehensible within the traditional ideological framework. How could 'subcontracting' and 'subdivision' of labour, and the interplay of low capital investment and a limitless labour supply, be thought together as comprising or producing the problem of sweating? In her diary in 1890 Beatrice Potter remarked on 'the delicious *positivism*' of the authors of the *Fabian Essays on Socialism*: 'Their optimistic conclusion that the world is most assuredly going their way, the plausible proof they bring in favour of their confidence, the good temper and the moderation, all impress the ordinary reader.'⁴⁴ The speeches of the noble lords in the debate on the *Final Report*, the commentaries of Fabians, *The Times* and *The Economist*, all have in common the persuasiveness of 'commonsense'. Whether sweated labour might be defined or not, the effects of sweating as the Select Committee listed them were there to behold: low wages, excessive hours of labour and unsanitary conditions – most palpably visible in Stepney and Bethnal Green. This ideology of straightforward commonsense, enacted in Potter's political behaviour, is part of the historical context. The conditions of the sweated poor were all too visible, and my final historical point is that, in 1990 as in 1890, 'these conditions of existence include the ideological as well as the economic'; the relevant historical conditions are simultaneously 'the existing conditions and *the conditions of existence of the phenomenon under consideration*', i.e. the permitted understanding of sweating.⁴⁵ The conditions of existence of sweating as a work process in 1890 included the procedures of the House of Lords, the agenda of the Fabians, the opinions of the press. They also included the indefiniteness of sweating as a concept.

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⁴⁴ B. Webb, *Diary, op. cit.*, 1, 327.

For Marx, trans. by B. Brewster (New York, 1970), 207; my emphasis.

⁴⁵ L. Althusser, 'On the materialist dialectic',