Charles Booth:

the examination of poverty

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Abstract. Charles Booth's studies of poverty are widely misrepresented in the literature of social policy. His work is commonly bracketed with Rowntree's, but his methods were quite different. His definition of poverty was explicitly relative; he based his analysis of poverty on class and status, rather than income. He did not attempt to define need, or to identify subsistence levels of income on the basis of minimum needs; his 'poverty line' was used as an indicator of poverty, not a definition. His approach was to identify the sorts of conditions in which people were poor, and to describe these conditions in a variety of ways. To this end, he used a wide range of qualitative and quantitative methods in an attempt to add depth and weight to his descriptions of poverty. He is described by Beatrice Webb, with some justice, as 'the boldest pioneer ... in the methodology of the social sciences of the nineteenth century'.

The first part of Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People in London* was published in 1889. It was the beginning of seventeen volumes which covered, in three series, the issues of 'Poverty', 'Industry', and 'Religious Influences' - and much more besides. Primarily because of his work on poverty, Booth is now honoured as one of the founding fathers of social administration, but he is little read. In part, this reflects the extent to which Booth's writings are of a particular period: the pervasive value judgments tend to affect one's perception of the work as social science, and much of the specific content is of little interest now, except as a reflection of the spirit of a time. In part, too, it reflects the inordinate length of *Life and Labour*, which scarcely lends itself to close study. Within the work, though, there is much which is important for the study of social policy. In particular, Booth devised methods for the consideration of poverty which, though many have been subsequently rediscovered and improved upon, may help to illuminate aspects of poverty and the methodological problems of devising a satisfactory concept.

The foundations of Booth's thought

Booth remarked, at the outset of his study, that he considered the claims of socialists about the extent of poverty to have been grossly exaggerated. (The remark was reported by Hyndman, to whom he made it: it is cited by Pfautz, 1967). This is suggestive of an image, not uncommon in the nineteenth century - and important in the history of the Poor Law and public health - of a complacent bourgeois who was shaken by the discovery of poverty. There is perhaps some support for this view. Booth evinced, through much of his work, a complex (and sometimes confused) mixture of ideas and influences. First, he was a Christian, and a protestant; in the series on Religious influences, the primary emphasis goes on the missionary and social work of the churches. Second, Booth has important reservations about the moral character of the poor - which is one reason he had for opposing poverty, because poverty was seen as a degrading force. Williams sees the pervasive value judgments as the core of Booth's identification of 'classes' (1981, p. 326-7). Third, Booth draws strongly from the the common economics of his time, emphasising the virtues of classical liberalism, individualism and industry. The moral and economic analysis come together in Booth's concern about the problems caused by charity, which degraded and impoverished the poor - a view he shared with others like Octavia Hill (who wrote a section of Life and Labour) and C S Loch (who criticised it), both among the founders of the Charity Organisation Society.

Stedman Jones (1971) represents Booth as an apostle of the right, gravely concerned with the effect of the residuum on the deserving poor. Williams condemns Life and Labour for its 'tired philosophical conservatism' and its 'congenial banality' in avoiding structural issues or even resolute argument to an end (p. 339). Woodroofe (1962), by contrast, paints him as a reforming socialist, citing his aspirations in the following terms:

> "My idea is to make the dual system, Socialism in the arms of Individualism, under which we already live, more efficient by extending somewhat the sphere of the former and making the division of function more distinct." (Poverty, I, p.167)

All, of course, are right, for Booth held several inconsistent views without seeing any contradiction between them. Booth was not what might nowadays be termed a socialist - or what Beatrice Webb, who worked with him, considered one - but he was strongly influenced by the prevailing climate of Christian Socialism, which emphasised, at one and the same time, morality, duty, and community, along with a concern for social justice. It is difficult to understand Booth's work - or, in many ways, the driving force of the study - without appreciating that Booth is indignant about poverty.

> "Hundreds of thousands of our neighbours in London are ill-fed, ill-clad and ill-housed, and are from a multitude of causes, at the mercy of any misfortune an ill wind may bring. And to balance this, there is the other great fact, that the

> neighbours of these poor people, in number perhaps no fewer, are endowed with surplus wealth." (Religious influences, VII, p.406.)

This statement is easily misinterpreted from a modern perspective; Booth's central concern was not with equality as such, but with the moral duties of a Christian community to those who are deprived. Christian Socialism, Norman writes, "was essentially moral rather than political, and emphasised voluntary solutions rather than collectivist ones." (1987, p. 6)

In assuming that Booth was attacking 'socialism', Hyndman had probably misunderstood Booth's approach. Andrew Mearns' pamphlet, The Bitter Cry of Outcast London, had been published in 1883, by the London Congregational Union. The work seems to have been enormously influential (Jones, 1968). Mearns appealed directly to Christian Socialist principles, but in a manner which was untypically forthright and highly political.

> "The State must ... secure for the poorest the rights of citizenship; the right to live in something better than the fever dens; the right to live as something better than the uncleanest of brute beasts. This must be done before the Christian missionary can have much chance with them." (Mearns, 1883, pp 18-19)

Booth disapproved of Mearns' sensational and journalistic style (see Waller, 1984, p. 41), and his comment about exaggerated claims is probably best understood as a comment on this kind of hyperbole. The root of Booth's intellectual approach lies in his positivism - a determination to establish the facts. He may have felt that unsubstantiated or generalised assertions about the extent of poverty weakened the arguments for poor relief. Certainly, the use he made of his work in arguing for benefits for elderly people supports this view; Booth had to show not only that support for elderly people was desirable, but also that it was feasible, and his enumerations played a major part of that argument.

None of this should be taken as underestimating the extent to which Booth's ideas and values are confused or inconsistent. His approach represented a common pattern of thought in the late nineteenth century. He was not, in this respect, an original; his own views were held not as a pure intellectual doctrine, but as a reflection of a social situation and the received wisdom of 'enlightened' circles of the day. Williams (1981) comments, with some justification, that Booth 'sustained conventional late nineteenth century identifications by retreating into an interpretative doxa about the nature of society' (1981, p.6). At the same time, this should not be held to detract from the sophistication of other aspects of Booth's approach. In the argument which follows, I have put little emphasis on the aspects of Booth's work - like his ethnocentricity, his tendency to condemn the poor, his limited consideration of social structure and dynamics - which help to place Booth in historical context. Much more important, from the point of view of the modern reader, is the question of what Booth's studies of poverty have to offer now.

The modern interpretation of Booth's concept of poverty

Booth is widely thought to have put forward a concept of poverty based in 'subsistence' needs. George writes:

> "Starting with Booth's study of poverty in London in the 1880s and Rowntree's study of poverty in York in 1899, poverty came to be considered largely as a condition that could be measured and which did not change much over time. Poverty was seen in physiological, physical terms." (1973, p.28)

Muriel Brown's Introduction to Social Administration follows a similar line:

> "A physiological definition of poverty is one which permits relatively easy translation into cash terms. ... A poverty line is drawn, being the minimal amount of money needed to keep a person out of poverty, and the numbers of people who fall below this line can then be counted. This technique of measuring poverty was

first used effectively in Britain ... in the pioneering surveys conducted by Booth and Rowntree. " (1985, p.21)

Some of this is arguably a misrepresentation of Rowntree (see Veit-Wilson, 1986), though that is not the concern of this paper. Rowntree did, at least, attempt to establish what the minimum needs of his time were, and judged that people were poor if these minimum needs could not be met. I was under the impression that the same was true of Booth when I wrote, in *Principles of Social Welfare*, that:

> "Charles Booth, in his studies of Victorian England, identified the main basic needs as food, clothing, fuel and shelter, and treated people as 'poor' when they lacked enough money to satisfy those needs." (1988, p. 6)

This, of course, was second-hand. George (1973), for example, had written:

> "Poverty as first defined by Booth and Rowntree ... meant subsistence living. Food, clothing, housing, heating and a group of miscellaneous items are the basic necessities that have to be provided for the abolition of subsistence poverty." (1973, p.40)

The same view of Booth's work can be traced back at least to Llewellyn Smith, who had worked with Booth and ought to have known.

> "The incomes of these families as described by him were barely sufficient, and often less than sufficient, to procure the necessary minimum requirements in respect of food, clothing, fuel, shelter and light." (1930, p.17)

I accepted this view in all innocence; if I'd failed to find the relevant section in Booth, it was just because I hadn't read very much of his work. There is a bitter lesson in all this. Bertrand Russell comments that

> "Aristotle could have avoided the mistake of thinking that women have fewer teeth than men by the simple device of asking Mrs Aristotle to keep her mouth open while he counted. He did not do so because he thought he knew. Thinking that you know when in fact you don't is a fatal mistake ... " (1961, p.94)

Mea culpa. Having gone through *Life and Labour* cover to cover, I can find no trace in Booth's writing of anything vaguely approaching the view represented in the texts. Perhaps more important, the view of poverty which emerges is directly in conflict with the received view.

Much of the problem stems from the relationship between Booth's work and Rowntree's. Booth is usually referred to in tandem with Seebohm Rowntree; writers on poverty genuflect in his direction, but of the two they devote their time to Rowntree, on the basis that Rowntree's concepts were better defined and more clearly addressed the issues of defining a 'subsistence' level of poverty. Townsend criticises "the subsistence concept, invented and worked out in England by Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree in the late nineteenth century" (1970, p.x); he spends virtually all his time on Rowntree, and notes that "Charles Booth's major work ... was on a larger scale but employed a cruder measure of poverty." (1979, p.33n). Baugh suggests that Rowntree used a 'more precise method of assessing a minimum income' (1987, p.14). And Rose (1972) comments that

> " ... Rowntree did far more than merely dot the i's and cross the t's of the Booth survey. Taking Booth's methods as his starting point, he developed and considerably improved his technique."

This is certainly the impression which Rowntree conveys. Rowntree's work drew directly on Booth's. He took Booth's classification as a starting point for further analysis; he consulted with Booth about the issues; and Booth was to write to Rowntree that there was 'a slight difference in our methods' (Rowntree, 1922, p.355n) as if this was unimportant - as indeed, to Booth, it was; he was more excited by the discovery of similar results in different locations. He continued:

> "The methods adopted by you are more complete than those I found available for the large area of London. I made an estimate of the total proportion of the people

> visibly living in poverty, and from amongst these separated the cases in which the poverty appeared to be extreme and amounted to destitution, but I did not enter into the questions of economical or wasteful expenditure. ... It is very possible that few of those classed by you or me as poor would pass muster as sufficiently nourished, clothed, and housed ... but your classification separates those who conceivably might be so from those who certainly could not. It is in this respect that my classification falls short of yours ... " (Rowntree, 1922, p.356)

This has led fairly naturally to the misapprehension that Booth's study was developed within a similar framework to Rowntree's. But there were major differences, which Booth was well aware of. In his own assessment of Rowntree's work, which appeared in the last volume of *Life and Labour*, he wrote that

> "the methods of research and the lines of argument adopted are somewhat new" (Final Volume, p.30).

Nevertheless, he saw Rowntree's work as a reinforcement of his arguments, as did Rowntree himself; both were positivists, for whom the discovery and rediscovery of facts proved the validity of their case. But it is questionable whether they can be said to have the same basic concept of poverty; and, whether or not they did, they certainly did not use similar approaches.

The definition of poverty

The place to begin is with Booth's definition of poverty. At first sight, it might look as if Booth does have a subsistence concept of poverty in mind, for he refers to the poor as

> "living under a struggle to obtain the necessaries of life and make both ends meet; while the 'very poor' live in a state of chronic want." (Poverty, I, p.33)

He further distinguishes 'poverty' from terms like 'want' and 'distress', with the intention of considering a series of different levels of poverty. People who are 'in want' are described in the following terms:

> "They are ill nourished and poorly clad. But of them only a percentage - and not, I think, a large percentage - would be said by themselves, or by anyone else, to be 'in distress'" (Poverty, I, p.131)

Those who are 'poor' are described as

> "neither ill-nourished nor ill-clad, according to any standard that can reasonably be used. Their lives are an unending struggle, and lack comfort ..." (p.131)

Posterity, conditioned by the conceptual framework used by Rowntree, misinterprets such comments. These terms all constitute part of a description of poverty rather than a definition. The issues of food, clothing, shelter and the struggle to survive are referred to as the most important examples, for Booth, of the sorts of deprivation he wanted to draw attention to.

The terms in which Booth defines poverty are different. The poor, according to Booth,

> "are those whose means may be sufficient, but are barely sufficient, for decent independent life; the 'very poor' those whose means are insufficient for this according to the usual standard of life in this country." (Poverty, I, p.33)

This deserves close scrutiny. First, Booth was not saying, as George suggests, that poverty does not change over time. On the contrary, the test is 'decent independent life', or 'the usual standard of life in this country' - a concept which is socially defined, and very explicitly relative. Townsend contrasts the 'absolute' approach to poverty - the view Booth and Rowntree are supposed to have - with a concept based on 'relative deprivation':

> "the absence or inadequacy of those diets, amenities, standards, services and activities which are common or customary in society." (1979, p.915)

Clearly, the social context in which diets, amenities, standards and so forth are defined has changed, and with it the understanding of poverty and its impact. But it is difficult to see this as more than a restatement of Booth's initial position.

Second, Booth's definition clearly conceived of poverty in terms of 'means' - a term which is not limited, in his studies, to income, but which is widely understood in terms of financial resources, housing and domestic circumstances. The emphasis is on the material base of poverty - a point which was subsequently the basis of criticism of Booth's work, and which he compensated for by a later examination of the influence of religion.

Third, Booth was considering, in a striking way, the condition of 'the poor and the poorest'. When Townsend and Abel-Smith led the 'rediscovery' of poverty in the 1960s, they used varying definitions of income in order to take into account not only those people who fell below an identifiable line, but also those people who were on the margins of poverty (1965). Here, Booth is treating as poor people whose resources are sufficient for a normal social life but who may nevertheless experience some degree of hardship.

The classification of poverty

Booth based his analysis of poverty on an explicit division between eight classes:

"A. The lowest class of occasional labourers, loafers and semi-criminals.
B. Casual earnings - 'very poor' } together
C. Intermittent earnings } 'the poor'
D. Small regular earnings.
E. Regular standard earnings.
F. Higher class labour.
G. Lower middle class.
H. Upper middle class." (Poverty, I, p.33)

Rowntree (1922 and 1941) was also to use the idea of 'classes', which he defined in terms of his own standard of poverty. This was fairly directly based on Booth's approach, and Rowntree himself probably thought of this aspect of his work as a refinement of Booth's method. However, there are important differences between the two. Rowntree's first four 'classes' are related to income, A being below 18s a week, B 18s-21s, C 21s-30s and D 30s and above (1922, p.53). By contrast, the basis of Booth's classification is not immediately clear. It looks, at first sight, like a grouping of people according to their incomes - which means that the classification of class B as very poor, and C and D as poor, reflects their position in the distribution of income. Certainly, this is the nature of the distinction between classes D and E. But there are two objections to this interpretation. The first is that Booth includes at least four groups, classes A, F, G and H, which are identified not by their income but rather by their status in society. This point would not be sufficient in itself to distinguish Booth from Rowntree, because Rowntree also refers to status groups as well as to income. The second, more important objection is that Booth classifies incomes, when he does so, not primarily according to their size, but rather to their source. Classes B, C and D are distinguished by the frequency of their income. This is quite different from the basis used by Rowntree; it is a distinction of class, in the sense of groups defined by their economic relationships, rather than of income.

The classes are not very rigorously defined, and I think it could be argued that Booth simply had not formed at this stage a very clear idea of the theoretical basis for distinguishing groups. Williams suggests that the classes were identified on three criteria - relationships to the labour market, the domestic economy of households, and their moral character (1981, p. 325). These elements certainly occur within the discussion of the classes, but it is going too far to propose, as Williams does, that the basis of the

classification is moral, or even that they should be taken as an argued position. Booth did not attempt to apply either clear discriminating principles or an explicit explanatory theory; this was not his purpose. This may seem unacceptably imprecise, but if the work of classification is descriptive rather than analytical, the attempt to identify broad classes of respondent makes perfectly good sense. The classes represent, simply, groups which seemed to experience significant differences in their lifestyle. Booth does not say that everyone in these classes is poor; he does not even say that people in these classes have less income than they would need to meet basic needs. The primary basis for the distinction seems to have been observation, rather than theory. Life and Labour describes a range of social conditions in which it seemed that people are likely to be poor or on the margins of poverty.

There is, as a result, an element of vagueness in Booth's approach to poverty throughout Life and Labour - a vagueness he frequently acknowledged. When considering the question of 'comparative poverty' - how it is that people might be described as 'poor' in a variety of different situations - his response was that the descriptions of people's circumstances would have to speak for themselves (Religious influences, IV, pp. 97-101.) His belief in the force of the 'facts' was central to the way he elected to present the material.

The poverty line

The aspect of Booth's classification which was to attract most attention was his use of a 'poverty line', which distinguished poor people from others.

> 'By the word 'poor' I mean to describe those who have a sufficiently regular though bare income, such as 18s to 21s a week for a moderate family, and by 'very poor' those who from any cause fall much below this standard.' (Poverty, I, p.33)

The concept of the 'poverty line' is described by the Simeys, in a much quoted phrase, as "perhaps his most striking single contribution to the social sciences" (1960, p.88), a statement which has damned Booth with faint praise. The 'poverty line' was seen as significant because it was the means which had been used by Rowntree to establish a subsistence basis for poverty; and Booth is parcelled in with other researchers, for example by George (1973):

> "Booth, Rowntree and Bowley relied too much on expert opinion of minimum needs ..." (1973, p. 50)

However, this is based in a confusion. Booth made no attempt to assess basic needs by any method; his concept of a poverty line was intended for other purposes entirely.

One of the most important issues to note about the 'poverty line' in Booth is that it is not a 'line' at all. Booth describes a range of income which was likely more or less to be associated with a basic standard of life. He did not directly justify the selection of this range of income in terms of needs - a point which has been taken to indicate a degree of imprecision in his research. Alcock, for example, writes that

> "Booth's work ... contained a definition of poverty as living under a struggle to find the necessities of life. He fixed this, somewhat arbitrarily, at an income of 18s to 21s a week." (1987, p.3)

The selection of the line would indeed be arbitrary if it were intended as a measurement of need. But there is nothing in the poverty series to suggest that it was intended as a measure of need. The 'poverty line', like the description of classes, was not a defining characteristic of poverty, but a descriptive tool. The basis for the figure of 18s to 21s is explained in the final volume of the second series. Booth had identified this as the lowest part of the range of regular earnings.

> "I take 21s as the bottom level for male adult labour in London. The employments in which less than 21s a week (or 3s 6d a day) is paid are exceptional in character.

> When the rate is 18s or 20s the work is not only characterised by great regularity and constancy with no slack seasons or lost days, but is generally such as a quite young or old man could perform - men who preferably have only themselves to keep." (Industry, V, p.266)

Booth suggests by the use of this level of wages as a 'poverty' line that the range of income over which people are likely to experience difficulties in making ends meet is the region which distinguishes people in regular work from those who were either in particularly low paid occupations, or who were casually or intermittently employed.

Although the selection of the 'poverty line' was determined by observation rather than by theory, it is possible that there is the ghost in it of the 'iron law of wages', an economic principle commonly attributed to Ricardo which played a major part in the thinking of the writers of the Poor Law report of 1834. Ricardo argued, in his *Principles of Political Economy*, that there was a 'natural wage' which would in the long term keep population stationary. If there were too many people, wages would fall below subsistence, which would lead to a reduction in population; if there were too few, wages would rise, and people would be encouraged to increase the population (Blaug, 1968, pp 121-123). It is debatable whether this is precisely equivalent to the 'iron law' as it came to be understood, but the iron law was to become part of the received wisdom of political economy in was the basis of the criticism made in the Poor Law Report of the Speenhamland system, which was believed to undercut wages; Poynter (1969) describes the effect on the writers of the Poor Law report, who seem to have seen the principle of 'less eligibility', and the confinement of relief to the destitute, as a protection for the position of independent labourers whose wages would otherwise be reduced. The same argument occurs in Mary Tabor's section in *Life and Labour* on Elementary Education, which criticises free school meals on the basis that

> "The free meal every school-day, given to all who on the score of need put in their claim, simply reduces by so much the minimum cost, and, therefore, the minimum wage, at which family life is possible." (Poverty, III, p. 229)

Booth's reference to the 'poverty line' may well be to what he perceived to be the effective minimum wage.

Booth's failure to identify basic needs was the subject of considerable criticism, because the poverty line seemed to many people impossibly generous. Booth responded to this criticism by providing examples of a small number of indicative household budgets (Simey and Simey, 1960, 184-187). The issue of the household budget became the focus of much debate about Booth's work. Helen Bosanquet, for example, suggested in 1896 that a single adult could live on five shillings a week (her budget, intriguingly, consisted of expenditure on lodgings, food, and tobacco, but nothing else) (cited Bowpitt 1985). Later, when the thrust of research into poverty moved entirely into consideration of the household budget, this was the approach that some of Booth's supporters, like Llewellyn Smith, emphasised.

Rowntree's definition of a poverty line was certainly influenced by this type of debate. One of the objections raised against Booth was that he had failed to distinguish the circumstances of people according to their behaviour. C.S. Loch objected to Booth's work

> "that poverty is so entirely relative to use and habit and potential ability of all kinds, that it can never serve as a satisfactory basis of social investigations or social reconstruction. It is not the greater or lesser of command of means that makes the material difference in the contentment and efficiency of social life, but the use of means relative to station in life and its possibilities." (cited Bowpitt, 1985, p 379)

Bosanquet, similarly, was prepared to assert that

> "there are comparatively few families in London through whose hands there had not passed in the course of the year sufficient money and money's worth to have made a

> life free at any rate from hunger and cold, and with much in it of good." (ibid, p.379)

Rowntree's distinction of 'primary' and 'secondary' poverty (1922, ch 9) was a direct refutation of these criticisms; he was able to demonstrate that even a person who budgeted perfectly, with no expenditure on luxuries and the most rigorous standards imaginable, would nevertheless be poor.

Booth's household budgets were, however, drawn up with a different purpose from Rowntree's, and in a different way. The household budgets are presented, not in terms of needs, and not in terms of income, but in terms of recorded expenditure. This was consistent with Booth's desire to describe the condition of the poor. The average income of the six families in class B he estimated at 5s 11d a week, but suggests that, because his sample did not include many of the poorest, "the true average of B will be somewhat lower than this" and five shillings would be a reasonable estimate (Poverty, I, p. 133). Bosanquet, then, had missed the point. Booth had not said that people could or did not live on five shillings a week, low as the amount may have been; what he was saying was that those who were doing so were very poor, a point he sought to substantiate by the description of such people's lifestyles.

Marshall criticises Booth's use of the poverty line as careless and inconsistent (1981, p.37), which is unjust. The Simeys argue, I think more appropriately, that

> "Booth did not hold on to earnings as a measure of poverty with any degree of firmness. Booth's poverty line must be regarded as being drawn so as to coincide with popular opinion. ... The key phrase is in the definition in the Second Paper; those families are 'very poor' whose means are insufficient 'according to the usual standard of life in this country'; it was not his fault if his endeavour to translate this into shillings and pence for illustrative purposes was regarded by others as the main factor in his evaluation." (1960, p. 279)

The poverty line is an indication of the sort of incomes over which people are likely to become poor; the household budgets represent the behaviour of people in the condition of poverty. As such, both were part of a description of poverty, rather than an operational analysis of need.

Crowding and poverty

Life and Labour of the People in London was written over a long period of time, and Booth's first attempts to define poverty were gradually reconsidered. At the beginning of the second series, Industry, Booth introduces a further test of poverty which seems in important ways to have overtaken in his view the initial classification of poverty. This is the measure of 'crowding', based on the number of persons in each room. In the first volume, published in 1895, he recognises the differences between crowding and poverty (Industry 1902, I p.10) but was clearly impressed by the similarities between the figures:

> "It will be seen that the total percentages 'crowded' and 'not crowded' agree very nearly with the totals of the previous classification 'in poverty' and 'in comfort' ". (p.10)

While recognising some of the limitations of the crowding statistics, he felt he had found an invaluable indicator of poverty. Crowding was certainly closely associated with deprivation, because people who had higher incomes were able to exercise choice to improve their living conditions - though it could hardly be taken to supplant all other criteria for the assessment of poverty. Among the researchers, Arthur Baxter seemed to recognise that there might be sources of poverty which were not likely to be directly reflected in housing conditions. Noting, for example, that labourers were

disproportionately likely to be crowded - only 43% earned under 25s a week, but over 59% were crowded - he comments that

> "the difference is not greater than might be expected in a section which includes a large number of men whose income is uncertain at all times." (Industry III, p.474)

However, Booth himself was much more positive about the appropriateness of using the crowding standard. He wrote in the first volume that:

> "The original classification has the advantage of being directly aimed at poverty ... but was based on an opinion only - that is, on the impression made on the minds of the school board visitors and others by what they had seen or heard as to the position in the scale of comfort of the people amongst whom they lived and worked, whereas the new classification is based on direct enumeration of the facts." (Industry I p.11)

Any original caution seems to have been eroded as the work proceeded. So, in his description of shopkeepers, Booth was to write

> "The amount of poverty indicated by the room test ... is naturally proportioned to the size of the shops" (Industry III, p. 250)

when it is very questionable in this context whether this could be a test of 'poverty' at all. By the end of the second series, published in 1897, the discrepancies between the original estimation of poverty and the statistics for crowding were very clear. Booth wrote:

> "We are probably justified in assuming, that on the average crowding does provide a reasonably fair measure of poverty; and some support is given to this assumption by the fact that the total percentage of poverty indicated by this test agrees almost exactly with that reached in our previous inquiry by a different method, about 30 per cent of poverty being shown in both ways. But the tests applied are very rough, and the results attained do not pretend to be more than an approximation to the truth ..." (Industry, V, p.4)

Faced with the choice between crowding and income as indicators of poverty, Booth plumped for crowding:

> "It must be admitted ... that the relationship between the statistics of remuneration and those of poverty as tested by crowding are not very close. ... One thing is abundantly evident, that the full amount of nominal wages does not, as a rule, reach the home." (Industry V, p. 25)

In the final volume of *Life and Labour*, Booth also uses the room standard as the basis of criticism of his initial records observations of poverty. Discovering that there was much less overcrowding in Wandsworth and Putney than the numbers in poverty, he suggests that poverty in those areas might have been overestimated (Final volume, p. 14). But there may have been other reasons for the discrepancy, which were not investigated.

The crowding standard was, certainly, only a crude measure of poverty, and it is perhaps unfortunate that Booth set so much store by it; the Industry series is much less rich in colour and depth than the Poverty series as a result. At the same time, the importance of the standard should not be overestimated; it was only one of many measures which Booth adopted.

Approaches to the analysis of poverty

Booth claimed, by the beginning of the third series, to have used three main methods - the description of poverty street by street; the use of materials about schoolchildren; and the crowding standard. "Broadly", he argued, "these three methods of social analysis supported each other." (Religious influences, I, p.2) Williams (1981) lists at least seven different classifications of people in poverty that can be found in Life and Labour. They include households by their patterns of employment; households by assigned class; streets by assigned class; schoolchildren, by broad groups; overcrowding; trades; and earnings and

wages. (This does not, as Williams notes, exhaust Booth's ways of looking at the problem of poverty; there is a different kind of consideration in the study of pauperism, first published in Pauperism: a picture (1892) and later in volume IV of the Industry Series.) The importance of these seven classifications is that they were all alternative ways of looking at the same basic issues.

Booth seems, too, to have considered a number of other indicators, which he elected not to use. Class, in the sense of social status, was not necessarily helpful:

> "the line of class is not always the line of poverty. There are many clerks, for instance, who though perhaps not poor from the subsistence point of view, are pinched owing to the increased requirements of life, and some even in great poverty who do not lose class." (Religious influences, I, pp 150-151.)

He classifies areas, in the final volume, partly by demographic statistics - birth rate, early marriages, and death rates - but found crowding more persuasive. Ill-health, and in particular death rates, are mentioned intermittently in the course of the third series. Booth seems not to have been very impressed by any association. Writing about one area, he comments that

> "It is an overcrowded, but not an insanitary area, and the death rate is said to be lower than in some respectable streets. It is merely, to use the forcible language of one of our witnesses, 'a collection of streets where beastly men and women live bestially'". (Religious influences, VI, p.19)

The use of modern statistical techniques might, of course, have given a different insight about the relative importance of such factors, but at this period they were in their infancy, and Booth could not really have been expected to use or to apply them in this context.

Booth's statements indicate a process of reflection about alternative sources of information which might cast some light on the issue of poverty. His use of a range of methods reflects the positivistic nature of his work. It was not the method which was important to Booth, but the result. And his acceptance of Rowntree's method, despite its 'slight' differences, was consistent with this position; it added further weight to the evidence. From the perspective of a modern reader, the use of so many different approaches is not less desirable because of suspicions about positivist methods; on the contrary, the vulnerability of social phenomena to differences in perspective requires a range of views to be taken. If one were attempting now to investigate any complex social phenomenon, and had the resources to do it, one would triangulate - using a multiplicity of methods, and investigating a range of operational definitions, to increase the reliability of one's observations. And that effectively is what Booth did, particularly in the first series.

The qualitative analysis

The significance of Booth's work was his success in offering a description, rather than any specific measure, of poverty. The qualitative methods which Booth used are not very clearly defined in the report of his work; Beatrice Webb's My Apprenticeship is helpful in establishing what was actually done. The methods included, at least,

- *Use of interview material conducted by school board investigators.*
- *Subsequent interviews of the school board officers.* Booth represents the material from the officers as coming in a fairly unadorned form; he states that he did not ask visitors to obtain any information specially for the investigation, and that 'we dealt solely with that which comes to theme in a natural way in the discharge of their duties'. This seems to underestimate the degree of interaction between researchers and officers. Booth apparently interviewed the visitors in minute detail; Beatrice Webb refers to a process of interviewing, testing out and seeking further information from them (1926, p.231). There is, too, some ground for scepticism

about Booth's claim that the officers were not asked to undertake any special tasks, which seems to have been a sop to the School Boards.

● *Examination of official records*. This was the basis for the analysis of pauperism. Booth went through the records of the workhouse, making judgments about the cases and drawing conclusions about the treatment of the 'deserving poor'. The text is highly judgmental, although this was later tempered to some degree: in the version presented in volume IV of Industry series, a number of comments made in Pauperism: a picture (1892) have been removed. As an example, in the following passage, the marginal notes (in italics) appear in the 1892 edition, but not in the Industry series:

> "Sarah Bishop ... is reported as hardly responsible. She had been passed to Stepney from Bethnal Green in 1877, being then 23 years old. She had had one child then. ... She and her four children are regularly chargeable. (Industry, IV, p. 339; and 1892, p.33)
>
> *Mental weakness*
>
> *Immorality*
>
> *Heredity* "

At the end of the descriptive sections, Booth uses a classification of causes of pauperism (as he understands them) in order to make out the case that elderly people require a pension.

● *Interviewing of subjects.* It is difficult to know to what extent this was done as part of the poverty series. Booth seems directly to deny that such interviews took place: "With the insides of the houses and their inmates there was no attempt to meddle." (1971, p.49) At the same time, the use of direct interviews certainly constitutes an important part of the investigation of trades. The different strands of investigation overlap, and it becomes difficult as the series goes on to separate out descriptions of industry from descriptions of poverty. Direct interviews do not seem to constitute a major part of the survey material, which for the most part was drawn from interviews by the school board investigators. However, Beatrice Webb also refers to some work in which she conducted 'enquiries' (e.g. 1926, pp. 323-4) from those in which she was acting as an observer, and elsewhere refers to visits to dockers' homes. (p.340)

● *Observation of subjects.* The Poverty Series is ambiguous about the role of observation; the Industry Series has little within it to suggest close observation of its subjects. The Third Series, by contrast, seems to indicate that Booth's reluctance to 'meddle' had substantially been overcome. He certainly undertook some visits to people's homes, though the process is far from explicit: at one point, he writes

> "In the next house to which the Jewish rabbi took us, we found a woman lying ill of consumption" (Religious influences, 2, p.243)

at another, there is a statement which seems unconsciously to capture some of the tone of such a visit:

> "Another house, which we ourselves visited, contained twenty-four persons. ... On the first floor were a man, wife and two children; and in the back room, an old woman and her son of thirty, liable to fits. Is it to be wondered, with such homes, that those who visit also give?" (Religious influences, I, p. 142).

[This final comment is more remarkable in view of the widespread condemnation in Booth's circles of 'indiscriminate charity': Booth himself had written, "that such charity concentrates and aggravates the evil who can doubt?" (Poverty, I, p.219)]

● *Interviewing of 'witnesses'.* The witnesses were mainly officials and others involved in the areas under study. Within the poverty series, the extent to which witnesses other than the school board visitors were consulted is unclear. Webb refers to the obtaining of 'all sorts of independent testimony' as distinct from

information obtained by personal observation or by interviewing intermediaries, though it is not clear to me what this refers to; there is little or nothing of this in the poverty series itself. In one minor episode, where she describes inviting an inappropriate guest to Booth's office to give an opinion, Webb seems to indicate that there were, besides the cases reported, probably a series of people giving evidence, opinions and comment about the work being undertaken.

By the time of the Industry series, the use of interview material is implicit within much of the material, and occasionally explicit. It becomes much clearer in the series on religious influences, where there are many specific references to testimony.

- *Observation of situations*. The use of direct observation is not very marked in the first series, with the notable exception of Beatrice Webb's work, and there is little in evidence during the second series. By contrast, there is considerable weight given to such direct observations in the third series. The use of 'notes' is remarkable not so much for the accuracy of the observations as to the weight attached to impressions. At times, the subjectivity of the judgments is so evident that it invites scepticism, but there are still some close observations. This example, taken from a Poor Board School, shows both aspects.

> "There were forty-eight of the boys at dinner - poor, thin, anaemic children - many of them very ragged; only three had collars. Chubby faces are scarce in this school." (Religious influences, II, p. 240)

- *The physical description of the environment*, which is a class of observation, occupies a major part of the first and third series; Booth comments that as the survey into poverty progressed, "we gained confidence, and made it a rule to see each street ourselves at the time we received the visitors' account of it" (1971, p 48).
- *Participant observation.* The modern term is not, of course, one which Booth would have recognised, but participant observation made an important contribution to the poverty series. Booth's own statements are fascinating.

> "It is not easy for any outsider to gain a sufficient insight into the live of these people. ... Of personal knowledge I have not much. I have no doubt that many other men possess twenty or a hundred times more experience of East End people and their lives. Yet such as it is, what I have witnessed has been enough to throw a strong light on the materials I have used, and, for me, has made the dry bones live. For three separate periods I have taken up quarter, each time for several weeks, where I was not known, and as a lodger have shared the lives of people who would figure in my schedules as belonging to classes C, D and E. Being more or less boarded, as well as lodged, I became intimately acquainted with some of those I met, and the lives and habits of many others came naturally under observation. My object, which I trust was a fair one, was never suspected, my position never questioned ... " (Poverty, I, p.157-158)

A similar desire to 'make the dry bones live' is evident in Beatrice Webb's attempts to work in sweated trades. She comments that 'observation is vitiated if the persons observed know that they are being observed' (1926, p 340) - an insight which is central to many of the issues around observation and participant observation.

Beatrice Webb played a major role in the development of these methods. She was, at one point, Booth's only volunteer, at a formative stage in the research. Booth's later investigators reveal little of the flair and inventiveness which she demonstrated in the aspects of the studies she wrote; there is a notable contrast between the style and approach of her contributions to the poverty series with, say, the stolid descriptions of trades by Duckworth, which are simple recording of information. Certainly, the qualitative analysis

overall owed much to her approach, and after she had withdrawn from the research, the methods used were substantially circumscribed. Fried and Elman attribute the deficiencies of the Industry Series to Booth's assistants (1971, p.36), but Booth's own contributions were limited in scope, and flawed by his excessive emphasis on the crowding standard. In the third series, something of the style of the first series re-emerges, but Booth separates out many of the subjective impressions, in the form of 'notes', and the circumstances under which anything approaching participant observation has taken place seem to have been confined to a limited number of settings (particularly religious worship).

This consideration of the qualitative nature of Booth's work may sound strange in terms of Booth's own profession of faith:

> "I am indeed embarrassed ... by my resolution to make use of no fact to which I cannot give a quantitative value. The materials for sensational stories lie plentifully in every book of our notes; but, even if I had the skill to use my material in this way - that gift of the imagination which is called 'realistic' - I should not wish to use it here." (Poverty, I, p.6)

The statistical elements of the work reinforce much of what he writes: they were in important ways (like the use of the crowding standard) to shape his perceptions about poverty, and they were crucial to the development of policy. But it is misleading to think of Booth primarily as a statistician. The main force of his method lay in description; he uses the striking metaphor (more striking in view of the early date) of photography.

> "The special difficulty of making an accurate picture of so shifting a scene as the low class streets in East London present is very evident, and may easily be exaggerated. As in photographing a crowd, the details of the picture change continually, but the general effect is much the same, whatever moment is chosen. I have attempted to produce an instantaneous picture, fixing the facts on my negative as they appear at a given moment ... " (Poverty, I, p.27)

This may have the air of a fancy; I do not think it is. The use of 'pictures' or images is a recurrent element within the research, reinforced by the use of brief thumbnail sketches and anecdotes.

> "The mother is a notorious drunkard, very violent in her cups, often in trouble with the police, and struck the Protestant missionary in the face of her defence of her holy mother of God, backing this up with oaths and foul language. The third floor was occupied by more Irish, and one of these, a powerful woman, took an active part in the attack on the missionary, driving him down stairs into the shelter of Mrs McConnell's shop." (Poverty, I, p.114)

Some of the writing is clearly intended to conjure up a 'feeling' for place, like the descriptions of Petticoat Lane or Covent Garden:

> "Brilliant flowers of all hues and kinds are ranged upon the stands, while the rising sun lights up the whole scene." (Poverty, I, p. 198)

Much of this sort of description is fairly pedestrian (though those who like Victorian prose style may still take pleasure in it). But the journalistic approach also fosters some writing which is astoundingly modern in flavour:

> "In one street is the body of a dead dog and near by two dead cats, which lie as though they had slain each other. All three have been crushed flat by the traffic which has gone over them, and they, like everything else, are frozen and harmless." (Poverty, II, p.96)

The third series contains a number of observations which are seemingly intended to move or inspire the reader, in the best Victorian tradition, and some perhaps which are intended to shock:

> "the back way to the public house passes through the property, and in this passage was a foul open urinal; near which dirty children were playing about while their mothers swore at them." (Religious influences, V, p.48)

The emphasis on the statistical elements in Booth's work has led to a disregard in much of the modern literature for the qualitative elements. It is not, after all, for the qualitative material that he is remembered; the Simeys' work, though it reads like uncritical hagiography, proclaims grandly that Booth is a 'social scientist' and makes especial note of the fact that at one point he came top in mathematics in his school. The statistical elements are certainly important in Booth's work, but they are not necessarily the elements of the greatest theoretical interest. Beatrice Webb understood the principles better than most. She wrote, in *My Apprenticeship*, that

> "from the standpoint of science it seems to me that Charles Booth's principal contribution was not the discovery of particular facts ... but his elaboration of an adequate technique in obtaining a vision of the condition of the whole population, within a given area, at a given time. ... In short, Charles Booth was much more than a statistician. He was the boldest pioneer, in my judgment, and the achiever of the greatest results, in the methodology of the social sciences of the nineteenth century." (Webb, 1926)

Conclusion

Standing on giants' shoulders one can see the world more clearly, and Booth was a giant, if a flawed one. Although Booth's work was to have a great influence in its day, in subsequent years it has been so far eclipsed by Rowntree's that its substance is all but forgotten. If there are lessons to be learned from Booth's work now, they are of three kinds. The first is that the examination of a complex social phenomenon is often best undertaken through a variety of methods. The second is that poverty is such a complex phenomenon, manifested in several ways; it is not easily reducible to issues like income, wealth, or class, which suggests that a descriptive approach may be more persuasive than a precise definition. Booth's great strength was to examine the phenomenon of poverty in many different aspects; his great weakness, like many who have followed him, was that he eventually fell prey to the temptation to fix on one simple answer which he thought could stand for the rest. The third lesson, of course, is that we should be careful not to forget what has actually been done. There is much to learn both from the insights that people have had and the mistakes they have made. It has been said that those who do not learn from the mistakes of history are condemned to repeat them.

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