

POOR PEOPLE

To the Editors:

In the course of his review of our book, *Charles Booth's London* (NYR, January 20, 1969) John Gross writes that we committed "a succession of factual errors," and then goes on to mention two. First, we "transmogrified" the English Marxist, H. M. Hyndman ("educated," Gross informs us, "privately and at Trinity College, Cambridge"), into the "autodidact F. D. Hyndman." Gross has us dead to rights on the question of initials, and we admit our error. But a person may go to college and still be called an autodidact. For autodidacticism refers more to a person's way of thinking than to his academic credentials. In his autobiography, *An Adventurous Life*, Hyndman tells us that he learned nothing at Cambridge and that his education began when he read Marx's *Capital* in French at the age of 39. (And Marx, it might be added, held him in contempt, partly for his autodidacticism.)

As to the second of our "errors," Gross writes: "it is quite untrue to say that in the 1880s London was still periodically plagued by cholera; the last major outbreak was in 1866, and by 1870, the disease was no longer a threat, largely on account of the public health measures which are of the first importance to anyone studying the administration of the city at this period, but which Fried and Elman, who personally seem determined to make a sufficiently dark picture even darker, studiously ignore." In the first place, it is not our intention to present a detailed study of the public administration of London. We wanted to give some idea of the state of affairs prevailing in the city, especially as they affected the poor in the 1880s. London, we wrote, "still lacked a water, sanitation, and public health system; it still suffered from periodic plagues of typhus and cholera; its poor laws were as archaic and oppressive as ever"; and not until the end of the decade was a municipal administration created "to assume over-all responsibility for education, sewage disposal, housing, and hospitals." Here, then, was our factual error: we failed to state explicitly that the last "major" cholera epidemic took place in 1866.

But how can Gross in turn assert that the disease was "no longer a serious threat" (thanks to public health measures, etc.)? How did the people of London know that the threat was over, or had ceased to be a major one? The sewage disposal system that had been built in the 1850s and 60s was already obsolete. The water was still horribly polluted, and control of the water supply still lay in the hands of private companies, whose political influence was enormous. In response to public opinion, a Royal Commission on Metropolitan Sewage Disposal was set up, and it found, after surveying the Thames in 1884, "a condition of things which we must denounce as a disgrace to the metropolis and to civilization." The Commission regarded the threat of cholera as a serious one.

We take exception to a few other things in Gross's review. After acknowledging that we praise Booth's objectivity, he states that we "get rather cross with him [Booth] when he argues that the better-paid workers and their families . . . often enjoyed a good deal of happiness." We have been unable to find

where we get rather cross with Booth on this matter (or on any other). In fact, we deliberately stressed the happy, or human and livable, side of lower-class London. Large sections of the book are devoted to Booth's description of London culture (or sub-culture), its modes of entertainment, its clubs, etc. We doubt, however, that Booth would have said, as Gross does, that the inhabitants of the East End at the turn of the century thought of their section "as a home rather than as a hell-hole or an abyss." If Booth demonstrated anything it was that the East End was both, that as long as one-third of its people lived at or below the poverty line those immediately above them—the skilled and unionized workers—were perilously insecure. The abyss might swallow them up at any time.

"The Poor are always with us," Gross declares in the opening sentence of his review. That any writer who begins on such a vast note of resignation about an enormous social crime should conclude with some disparaging remarks on the relevance of Booth's work to contemporary thinking about poverty in the United States is only to be expected. Obviously, Gross doesn't think such thinking is worth thinking about. Poverty in America, he implies, is largely a racial problem. "As for contemporary American cities," he writes, "the nature of their problems seems even more remote [than those of late 19th century London]. To take only the most obvious example, there were very few black people in Booth's London." True enough. But it is also true that most Americans presently living below the poverty line (a term, incidentally, that Booth invented) are white; two-thirds of them (20 out of 29.7 million) to be exact. And Gross should tell us directly, not elliptically, why color makes a significant difference when poverty is the question. It is as though one were to say that people starved in nineteenth-century Ireland because they were Catholic, or, more to the point, that Negroes today are on welfare because their families break up.

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