The social-scientific imagination

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Abstract: This article concentrates on Muriel Spark’s The Ballad of Peckham Rye (1960) and its indirect and mediated representation of the welfare state in the form of a ‘social-scientific imagination’, manifested in both cultural ideology and literary form. The ‘social-scientific imagination’ describes the textual engagement of Spark’s novel with the language and technique of newly professionalised social-scientific disciplines, in particular with new sociological studies of working life. In its representation of a shift in official modes of organising the social body, Spark’s novel prefigures the ideological undermining of the welfare state through the invocation of individual responsibility and anti-bureaucratization.
The Social-Scientific Imagination: Muriel Spark’s *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*

This article concentrates on Muriel Spark’s *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960) and its indirect and mediated representation of the welfare state in the form of a ‘social-scientific imagination’, manifested in both cultural ideology and literary form. The ‘social-scientific imagination’ describes the textual engagement of Spark’s novel with the language and technique of newly professionalised social-scientific disciplines, in particular with new sociological studies of working life. First, the article sketches out the historical background of state and social-scientific attitudes to workers, in addition to some of the literary and theoretical considerations of Spark’s text, outlining the vital role of the newly professionalised social sciences in configuring notions of a caring society. I consider how the architects of the welfare state articulate women’s place within it, and also the representation, in Spark’s novel, of welfare policies as both integral to women’s security and conscriptive of their behaviour. The article moves on to show how focusing on Spark’s ‘social-scientific imagination’ can help us to better understand some of the ‘middle-ness’ of mid-century writing by women. That is, my reading of Spark’s novel offers an affective history of the welfare state’s golden age while at the same time showing the cracks in the postwar consensus. Even during the period of postwar consensus, when there was apparent widespread agreement on social policy, we see prefigured in Spark’s novel, the ideological and actual undermining of the welfare state through the invocation of individual responsibility, flexibility and anti-bureaucratization.

Spark’s novel reflects a shift in official modes of organising the social body, and especially its workers, and it does so in two ways: by engaging with the language of sociological studies, and through its characterisation of Peckham’s working-class community, organised around a textile firm called Meadows, Meade & Grindley. In doing so, *Ballad also*
articulates a critique of two different approaches to industrial relations. First, there is
Peckham’s work life before the anti-hero Dougal Douglas arrives from Edinburgh to take up
the post of ‘Arts man’, which is regulated by Taylorist efficiency principles and operates
according to a model that David Harvey has described as ‘Fordist-Keynesian’. It is
characterised by rationality, planning, and ‘fairness’, one of the key terms of William
Beveridge’s 1944 Full Employment in a Free Society, which laid out the principles of
instituting full employment after the Second World War. Second, Spark’s novel also
illustrates the slow erosion of this model as Dougal infiltrates Peckham’s working community
to bring ‘vision’ to the lives of workers. ‘Vision’, apparently a near synonym for
‘imagination’ for Peckham’s business managers, seems also to imply workerly flexibility and
mobility. In the text, the imposition of ‘vision’ results, more often than not, and particularly
for Peckham’s women, results in precariousness and danger.

The Social-Scientific Imagination

Critics like Jed Esty have described an ‘anthropological turn’ in the modernist period, in
which earlier ethnographic studies of foreign cultures were superseded by auto-ethnographic
projects that made possible British national self-representation. This turn, according to Esty,
corresponded with the attenuation of the imperial project and the transition to what would
eventually become the welfare state. And in fact, the first significant government attempt to
plan and fund social scientific research neatly bridges the transition from empire to welfare
state. Introduced in a major piece of legislation known as the Colonial Development and
Welfare Act, the research to be funded was specifically designed as a form of social hygiene
in the colonies, but it also contributed to a larger programme of closely administered social
efficiency evolving conjointly in the metropolis and its colonial outposts. The Act thus
constituted one side of a twofold approach to social welfare that was presented as a moral and
economic imperative which would ensure national and imperial strength and future stability. By the time the Act was introduced in 1940, the British Empire was already under pressure, and its implementation in fact paradoxically marks a turn away from a colonial sociology to an anthropology and sociology at home. It is a turn that represents a transition in ways of perceiving, to ideas of functionalism, in which subject behaviour is conceived either as detrimental or as contributing to the system, and in which care and welfare of the subject is seen as crucial to social efficiency. And this new way of understanding social behaviour underpins the British state’s new orientation to its citizens, and particularly women, in the form of the welfare state.

What was also happening at the mid-century was that social-scientific disciplines, which had begun to flourish in university departments across the country, became increasingly bound up with public administration. The LSE’s inaugural lecture in 1950, for instance, envisaged that the main destination of sociology graduates would be Whitehall and perhaps Westminster. Graduates of the LSE in the 1950s would become the first ‘professional’ sociologists in the sense that they were the first generation with institutional support, who could make a living working as social researchers. This was due in part to the growth of the student body at the School and the necessary expansion of teaching duties at the LSE and university departments across the country, and also to the discipline’s being caught up in a gradual ‘process of incorporation’ into state institutions as sociology began to supply a scientific basis for economic and social policy.

In other words, at the mid-century, there is a further consolidation of the social sciences in that they are being institutionalised both in university and in government departments, and as a result, social scientific research begins to feed directly into the policy goals of a postwar society in which, to paraphrase William Beveridge, ‘men would stand together with their fellows’ to rebuild Britain as a modern nation. Beveridge made this
assertion in his famous 1942 report, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, in which he proposed a number of sweeping reforms to the system of social welfare. Throughout this report, it is clear that the emerging welfare state would be bound up with the project of reconstruction after the social dislocation of the war years, which included building a new national culture in the wake of total war and the end of empire. This is why, for the sociologist T.H. Marshall, the welfare state represented a unified nation ‘fighting for its life’.

The policies and institutions that comprise the welfare state have also been called the ‘postwar settlement’, a naming which suggests that social welfare programmes constitute a kind of restitution for wartime sacrifices, concessions to a nation for a hard-won peace. Marshall somewhat more optimistically proposed that the war shaped social policy in a slightly different way: he writes that wartime principles that ‘called for sacrifices from all and equally for help given ungrudgingly and without discrimination to all those who were in need’ would be reflected in a postwar ‘society governed by the same principles of pooling and sharing’. Here we see the postwar policy goals framed in a way that has care at its centre.

At the same time, Marshall’s contemporary, the sociologist Richard Titmuss, outlined in a 1946 essay what in his view were the most important objectives of welfare programmes:

To raise worker productivity, increase worker reliability and economic growth … To insure and protect the worker against the risks and hazards of industrialisation … To increase or decrease the birthrate … To prevent juvenile delinquency, crime and other forms of anti-social behaviour … To prevent sickness … in the interests of productivity … To integrate all citizens into society … to increase or decrease inequalities in the distribution of incomes. (64)

This passage registers what Spark’s novel seems to identify as the central ambivalence of welfare, poised between mechanisms of care and of control. Welfare policy aims to nurture and regulate simultaneously, so that the “postwar settlement” does in fact come to seem like a
compromise, or what the theorist Melinda Cooper describes as an imposed “reciprocal obligation,” where welfare services are received in exchange for checks on individual freedom (8). On the one hand, in providing basic services to everybody, the welfare state expands the definition of citizenship. On the other hand, citizenship in the welfare state is contingent on individuals allowing public discourse to enter into private life, structuring and regulating it. Here, the “relations of debt” are reinscribed on the body, with citizens expected to “give their life to the nation” (Cooper 8). This mirrors the ways in which “the economic survival of the nation is necessarily founded on [a] subterranean economy of biological reproduction,” and the ways in which concepts of “welfare” and “nation” are linked through the social citizenship of women as mothers (Cooper 8).

Beveridge states this explicitly in his 1942 report. He writes that, “[i]n the next thirty years housewives as mothers have vital work to do in ensuring the adequate continuance of the British race and of British ideals in the world” (53). Annexing women as mothers for the nation is not new to the postwar period, but the idea found renewed force in the context of postwar reconstruction, when women were interpellated into the project of building Britain as a “modern” nation in their role as mothers. So again, we see this tension between care and control, freedom and security, between real need for social welfare programmes and welfare institutions’ circumscription of women’s behaviour. And it is this tension that is at the heart of the sense of ambivalence, the sense of middleness, of women’s writing at this period.

While Spark’s novel is critical of institutions that act to delimit women’s behaviour, they also and importantly register their significance for the lives of women. In Ballad, welfare policies that are represented as coercive are usually at the same time representative of security and stability.

The Shilling-Metre Life
Spark’s novels routinely feature “fact-finders” who endeavour to “reduce human nature to the level of a card-index,” and “a long line of narrow masculine rationalists” like, for instance, *Memento Mori*’s Alec Warner, who relentlessly catalogues the life details of the members of his social circle (Cheyette, *Muriel Spark* 44, 42). Likewise, critics of Spark’s writing have variously noted how her novels explore the “dangerous potential” of “mythopoeic craving” that would write a tidy narrative from the recorded details of everyday life (Waugh, “Muriel Spark” 89). In *The Girls of Slender Means*, Nicholas wilfully mis-reads the May of Teck Club as “a microcosmic ideal,” characterised by his nostalgic longing for the “beautiful heedless poverty of a Golden Age” (80). For the young women concerned, however, Nicholas’s dreaming “did not come into the shilling-metre life which any sane girl would regard only as a temporary one until better opportunities occurred” (*Slender Means* 80).

Spark’s well-documented interest in the “shilling-metre-ness” of everyday life – what certain critics have called the “shallow and mechanical” (Cheyette, *Muriel Spark* 45) – amounts to a kind of aesthetics of the trivial in her writing. Accordingly, as Judy Little argues, “the ideology of the trivial is that it has no ideology, belongs to no master narrative, no great codes of quest or romance, and no *sermo patrius*” (Little 76, qtd. in Hodgkins, 140). Across Spark’s novels, attempts to make meaning by amassing the details of everyday life are thwarted in various strange and wryly funny ways. *Ballad* approaches this theme by satirising two kinds of social-scientific studies, creating characters that become embodiments of the science’s underlying ethos.

In particular, Spark’s novel opposes a participant observation model, which is explicitly invested in the regulation of workers’ lives; and Dougal Douglas’s more aesthetic approach, that gathers information in a less orthodox manner but that regulates workers’ lives in more elusive and destabilising ways. More broadly, these two kinds of studies reflect a shift in social-scientific approaches to work at the mid-century away from a Fordist-
Keynesian regulatory model which, as I will show, underpinned much of early welfare state policy. The Fordist model gleans information from participant observation and explicitly oversees the behaviour and home life of workers. From 1921 onwards, for instance, the Ford Motor Company had a Service Department, which had a network of “spies” who gathered information about workers on the floor. The Department was a new iteration of the company’s Sociological Department, which also kept records on the ways of living and spending habits of employees, but which was less obviously repressive in its approach to speeding up productivity. What emerged in reaction to this model was the field of Human Relations, heralded by the new expert professional who advocated an approach to managing workers that had creativity, flexibility and individualism at its heart.

Union Men, Shilling-Metre Women

The focal point of The Ballad of Peckham Rye is a textile firm in Peckham called Meadows, Meade & Grindley, which employs most of the characters, including the novel’s anti-hero Dougal Douglas, who has lately arrived from Edinburgh to take up the post of ‘Arts man’ at the firm. Officially, he is tasked with bringing “vision” into the lives of the workers in order to boost morale and to stop absenteeism within the company. He understands this to mean that “It will be my job to take the pulse of the people and plumb the industrial depths of Peckham,” and he embarks upon what he refers to as his “human research” (17). Early on, the novel gives a signal that it is at least thematically concerned with human or social research. We soon learn that the novel engages with the language of sociological study also at the level of form. It opens with the narrator reporting Humphrey Place’s return to Peckham after leaving his fiancée, Dixie, at the altar. And it is a report: Mavis, Dixie’s mother, “was seen to slam the door in his face, and he to press the bell, and she to open the door again”; Humphrey “appeared to consider the encounter so far satisfactory” (7). But who is watching? The
passive structure implies a watching subject, a roving eye that records other people regarding Humphrey, but seems to go itself unobserved. As Lewis MacLeod has argued in the context of surveillance, “disappearing amounts to an assertion of power,” which suggests, in The Ballad of Peckham Rye, an outsider observing from within the community (207). I suggest, then, that the roving eye in the novel represents the “scientific” observer of mid-century sociological studies of working life.

Likewise, the narrative introduces characters as though they were objects of sociological study: “In another chair lolled Collie Gould who was eighteen and had been found unfit for National Service; Collie suffered from lung trouble for which he was constantly under treatment and was at present on probation for motor stealing” (90). The narrator supplies us with Collie’s profile – or case file – giving his name, age, and employment status. Merle Coverdale is described in similar terms: “Merle Coverdale was head of the typing pool at Meadows, Meade & Grindley. She was thirty-seven” (29). There is a practical consideration in these telegraphed descriptions: they waste little space in a narrative that is in general spare and economical. But this kind of language also evokes that of sociological studies: the voice is that of the neutral observer making an apparently objective assessment by gathering facts about Collie and Merle’s histories. But these facts do not function metonymically: although they are intended to give a ‘profile’ of the subject, we do not actually learn anything essential about the characters. In general, the novel’s characters are not quite lifelike; they are, rather, presented as assemblages of distilled “facts” and character traits.

Humphrey Place, for instance, is a “qualified refrigerator engineer and a union man” (112). We are meant to take this literally: his speech is programmed by his involvement with the unions, so that during one of his first conversations with Dougal, he speaks in non-sequiturs, as though he were reading aloud from a union handbook: “By common law a trade
union cannot fine, suspend or expel its members. It can only do so contractually,” Humphrey says (26). The remark reads like a mechanical dictum, the significance of which is unclear, and it underlines the extent to which Humphrey is written as a literal “union man,” made up of union affect and coded by union rules. He tells Dixie that absenteeism “is immoral” (49), “downright immoral” (35), and “frankly and personally … an immoral thing to do” (55).

While it is true that “immoral” is one of Peckham’s more popular jibes, in the context of work Humphrey’s use of the word is peculiar. The morality of skiving off work is relative, particularly since Humphrey’s reasoning is that “you lose the support of your unions,” and, as he concedes, “Of course the typists haven’t got a union” (49). For Humphrey, however, “it’s a question of principle,” so he still disapproves when Dougal suggests Dixie take the day off work at the typing pool (49). His use of the word “immoral” here suggests that his orientation to work is ideological. C. Wright Mills writes in 1959 that the twentieth-century individual is a “self-rationalizing … individual [who,] caught in the limited segments of great, rational organizations, comes systematically to regulate his impulses, and his aspirations, his manner of life and his ways of thought, in rather strict accordance with ‘the rules and regulations of the organization’” (170). What he is describing is the modern man, alienated from his work – from production – and alienated from his leisure – from consumption (Mills 170). In this context, Spark’s narrative suggests that Humphrey might even be The Alienated Man, tout court, whom Mills also identifies by his “cheerful” – indeed, “robotic” – obedience to modern industry, the trade union, in Humphrey’s case (Mills 94).

In Spark’s text, this psychological colonisation has been accomplished by way of industrial efficiency techniques. During Dougal’s interview, Druce refers to an erstwhile post within the company filled by a man from Cambridge, who was engaged to “advis[e] on motion study. It speeded up our output thirty per cent. Movements required to do any given task were studied in detail and he worked out the simplest pattern of movement involving the
least loss of energy and time” (16). Time and motion study was the basis of Frederick
Winslow Taylor’s principles of “scientific management,” applied to industrial production by
Henry Ford. Taylor’s key text, Principles of Scientific Management (1911) proposes a system
in which an “efficiency expert” apparently acts “as an arbiter empowered to resolve class
conflicts” (Cobley 39). Taylor, Evelyn Cobley argues, was motivated by a “utopian ideal to
replace exploitation with cooperation,” far more interested in the optimum distribution of
effort and reward than he was in maximizing total output (Cobley 46). His system sought to
introduce into industry “a communal, cooperative method based on rational planning,”
wherein his efficiency techniques would lead to workers’ voluntary and spontaneous
cooperation (50). Applied to the Ford Motor Company production line, however, Taylor’s
principles of scientific management were turned into efficiency techniques used to do little
more than maximise output. The company’s Sociological Department kept records of
workers’ home lives and spending habits, and worked to “promote thrift among long-term
employees” (56). “In the name of efficiency,” Cobley writes, “people accepted a degree of
social manipulation,” but this type of “well-intended paternalism” resulted in “man-
machines” like Humphrey (57).

During this era of scientific management, “one great idea was woven into the fabric of
industrial society: that an increase in industrial efficiency would produce a corresponding
increase in social efficiency” (Cobley 98). If this was the case in the period between the wars,
it was even more so during the period of postwar reconstruction, and the new welfare state
relied upon, and was directed towards, social efficiency. Richard Titmuss, for instance,
writing in 1969, contends that, “national efficiency and welfare were seen as complementary.
The sin unforgiveable was the waste of human resources; thus welfare was summoned to
prevent waste” (130). Clement Atlee’s government wanted at all costs to prevent “a return to
the prewar conditions of slump and unemployment, of hunger marches and soup-kitchens, of
deteriorating slums and penury, and to the social unrest and political instability to which such conditions could all too easily lend themselves” (Harvey 68). The policies pursued by the Labour government to this end included the rapid reconstruction of cities, the introduction of the National Health Service over the summer of 1948, and full employment.

Which brings us back to Beveridge. Towards the end of the war, William Beveridge published *Full Employment in a Free Society*, a sequel to his 1942 *Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services*. Beveridge’s second study sought a way to implement full employment after the war, by which he meant “having more vacancies for workers than there are workers seeking vacancies” (1). This caveat would help to ensure the provision of “fair work,” which, he hoped, would induce cooperation amongst working people “in making the most of all productive resources” (19). In his preface to the 1960 reissue of the study, Beveridge reflects on some of his early concerns about full employment; namely, that he had considered the possibility that it could lead to inflation (caused, he argues, by recalcitrant and “self-interested” union action), and the possibility that, “Under conditions of full employment, if men are free to move from one employment to another and do not fear dismissal, may not some of them at least become so irregular and undisciplined in their behaviour as to lower appreciably the efficiency of industry?” (23). In both cases, Beveridge prescribes “responsibility”: “Bargaining for wages,” for instance, “must be responsible, looking not to the snatching of short sectional advantages, but to the permanent good of the community” (23). National reconstruction and the fight against “national decline” – an issue coming to the fore as the United States rose to the status of world power – would be underpinned by social efficiency and social responsibility, everyone working towards the same, long-term welfare goals.

In *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, Humphrey’s loyalty to the “union” – which in fact extends to the whole community of workers – suggests dedication of the kind Beveridge
deems necessary for the implementation and continuance of full employment. In *Ballad*, even the trade union is invested primarily in industrial efficiency: Humphrey tells Dixie and her family that, “Overtime should be avoided except in cases of necessity … because eventually it reduces the normal capacity of the worker and in the long run leads to under-production, resulting in further demands for overtime. A vicious circle” (125). He has in fact been primed by Fordist-Taylorist industrial methods to be the ideal, efficient subject of the welfare state. Cooperative, community-orientated, and committed to national efficiency, the ideal subject also uses his higher wages to participate in the consumer society.

Dixie, apparently also embodying the good subject of the welfare state – in that she exhibits the deferral of immediate pleasure implied in Beveridge’s notion of “responsibility” – is also a pathological saver, supplementing her income from the Meadows, Meade & Grindley typing pool by working nights as an usherette. The reader first meets her as she stands “in her little room of the upper floor of 12 Rye Grove and scrutinize[s] her savings book. As she counted she exercised her pretty hips, jerking them from side to side to the rhythm of ‘Pickin’ a Chicken’, which tune she hummed” (10). This taking of accounts is the first thing Dixie does after “Humphrey had been sent away from the door, and the matter had been discussed,” just as, throughout the text, money and saving determine the parameters of her relationship with Humphrey (9). She puts off their wedding until she has enough saved, and while Humphrey tries to undress her when they go out on the Rye, she talks about money: Connie Weedin’s increment (“Fifteen shillings rise, less tax, nine and six in Connie Weedin’s packet”) and her blackmailing brother, Leslie (“I give him five shillings a week. I think it should be three shillings weeks when I don’t stop out at night”) (55). Her language is marked by the logic of penny pinching, and her conversations with Humphrey – like Humphrey’s conversation with Dougal alluded to above – read as missed connections of question and response. Dixie is the shilling-metre girl taken to her logical conclusion, a
mechanical piggy bank, her mouth clicking open and shut to accommodate new sums. For Dixie’s habit is more than keen saving: the other characters see her behaviour as abnormal.

“Dixie wants a certain sum,” Humphrey tells Dougal: “She has her mind set to a certain sum. It keeps her awake at night” (49). Dougal responds that “avarice” is Dixie’s “fatal flaw,” but it is not merely avarice that drives her; Dixie wants security, which she articulates as a spin-dryer and a model bungalow (Ballad 29). Like the shilling metre-girls in The Girls of Slender Means, her outlook is obsessively forward-orientated. Cobley explores how the “perfectibility” of machines metamorphoses into the notion that society can be perfected, an idea which corresponds with postwar concepts of renewal and social reform. But Dixie’s saving, bound up with these ideas of self-improvement, is rendered as pathological because of the specific ways in which women are interpellated into the project of national renewal. One of the exigencies of the postwar welfare state is that women leave the work force after marriage: “the post-war social security system,” Jane Lewis argues, “went to some lengths to preserve male work incentives” (21). Specifically, Beveridge’s plan assumed that all married women would forego paid work.

Women and the Welfare State

In February 1943, Vogue ran a piece by Nicholas Davenport, ‘The Beveridge Plan – for Women’. Davenport was trained in economics and worked primarily as a journalist. His byline at the top of the article lists his previously published work, a volume entitled Vested Interest or Common Pool?, a critique of Britain’s war effort, which he felt had been hampered by the ‘vested interests’ of political parties and the trade unions, who only joined forces in order to ‘rob’ local communities. We see a similar anxiety about the power of the unions running unchecked in Beveridge’s own plan, so in that respect Davenport is well-placed to champion Beveridge’s work. In the Vogue piece, Davenport writes directly, even
intimately, to the women of Britain in an effort to persuade them of the advantages of
Beveridge’s policy recommendations. A spread, which features a full-page photograph of
Beveridge and his wife Jessie, accompanies the article, framing Beveridge as a trustworthy
husband and family man. The article is not completely uncharacteristic of wartime Vogue,
which ran articles about rationing alongside advertisements for mackintosh coats, but what is
surprising is the idea that Beveridge’s plan had to be promoted to women. The report had
been well publicised in newspapers, and public opinion polls showed that it was extremely
popular across the board, even if people doubted the proposals would be implemented by
government. There is good reason for the plan’s popularity: the report proposed to eradicate
what Beveridge called the five ‘Giant Evils’ in society: squalor, ignorance, want, idleness,
and disease. It proposed a comprehensive system of social insurance from cradle to grave;
benefits would be paid to the unemployed, the sick, the retired and the widowed. It was, as
even Margaret Thatcher – who a couple of decades later worked assiduously to undermine it
– said, by any measure a landmark.

And yet, it is also clear women were a particular demographic Beveridge felt some
anxiety about getting on board. So what was the problem? In the first place, the welfare
system was underpinned by a belief that women would be dependents of men and that,
therefore, most women’s access to the welfare state would be through their husbands.
Married women thus received a lower rate of benefit for the same contributions, and many
opted out of the contributions system altogether. Similarly, single women received lower
rates of benefit than a man, even if they paid in the same amount, while unmarried mothers
had difficulty accessing benefits at all since their caregiving duties made them ‘unavailable’
for work.

*The Ballad of Peckham Rye*’s representation of Dixie reflects an anxiety about how
the postwar wife fits into the welfare state. If, to paraphrase Cooper again, citizens of the
welfare state are expected to give their lives to the nation, the folding of the individual into
the communal is even more complete for working women like Dixie, who, once married,
become classified as dependents of their husbands. As far as the state is concerned, her assets
will belong to Humphrey, and even her own benefits would be payable through her husband’s
insurance. Banal though they may seem, the spin-dryer and the model bungalow, purchased
with her own money, represent Dixie’s self-assertion in the face of what she experiences as
effectively a curtailment of her participation in society. On this reading, Dixie’s obsessive
saving is a symptom of living in a social system that holds out the promise of the good life
but with implicit, and significant caveats. It is possible to read into this a tongue-in-cheek
criticism of the qualified nature of this promise, that in exchange for full participation in the
welfare state, it asks citizens to act in ways that conform to the project of national renewal, a
project that itself centres the family as the key site of social reproduction. At the same time,
when compared with a projected alternative, the patriarchal assumptions about postwar
workers are at least representative of a kind of security and stability

Workplace Vision

The alternative, as it is represented in Ballad, is the management of workers by the emerging
field of Human Relations, in which responsibility for the safety and security of employees is
devolved onto the workers themselves, and in which social solidarity, pooling of resources,
and a centralised health service – all of the elements that make up the welfare state – are seen
as hindrances to individual self-fulfilment. Unlike the Cambridge man previously brought in
to Meadows, Meade & Grindley to retrain workers in the most efficient movements, the ‘Arts
man’, a role I see as analogous to the human relations expert, is hired to engage the minds of
workers so that they can “get things done”. Hired to stop absenteeism and boost morale,
Dougal is informed by Mr Druce that the way to go about this is by inspiring the workers
with “vision”. What this means is unclear: the firm has already tried time-and-motion studies and “lectures on Art,” so Dougal embarks on a course of “human research,” and his philosophy seems motivated by flexibility and mobility: he almost immediately begins encouraging workers to take time off, and he manages to secure a similar full-time position at another firm, located just across the river.

His research methods are suitably unorthodox: “I shall have to do research,” Dougal muses, “into their inner lives. Research into the real Peckham. It will be necessary to discover the spiritual well-spring, the glorious history of the place, before I am able to offer some impetus” (Ballad 17). He proceeds to collect a significant amount of local interest stories, historical trivia, and other ephemera. When Humphrey tries to give Dougal practical advice about industrial relations, Dougal replies, “Fascinating … Everything is fascinating to me so far. Do you know what I came across the other day? An account of the fair up the road at Camberwell Green” (26). In trying to locate the “moral character” of Peckham, Dougal’s data collection makes no distinction between historical anecdote and contemporary social reality (69). Dougal’s methods reflect a new tendency in sociology identified by Mills as ‘illiberal practicality’, which he defined as a kind of ‘abstracted empiricism and its bureaucratic use’ (92). Sociological studies in the abstract empirical style pile up details with ‘insufficient attention to form’, resulting in a huge, and, according to Mills, largely useless data set that analysts nonetheless put to bureaucratic use.

Dougal’s research entwines ancient and recent history – literary, military, monarchic and anecdotal – with the present in a way that rings aesthetically true, but is impractical for his present purposes of bringing vision to the life of Peckham’s factory workers. After reading out to Humphrey an advertisement for an exhibition of a “lately caught and highly accomplished young mermaid” (17) from 1840, he explains that he found it in the library: “My research. Mendelssohn wrote his ‘Spring Song’ in Ruskin Park. Ruskin lived on
Denmark Hill. Mrs Fitzherbert lived in Camberwell Grove. Boadicea committed suicide on Peckham Rye probably where the bowling green is now, I should imagine” (28). Pursuing “the fantastic in the most seemingly banal places” is characteristic of new studies of everyday life (Highmore, *Everyday Life* 16). Yet, as I discuss below, there is something troubling about Dougal’s version of this: as Highmore writes, “the spectacularization and exoticizing of everyday life” is also an aspect of the culture of colonialism, and is therefore not a value neutral endeavour (*Everyday Life* 16). Dougal’s vision is kaleidoscopic, beautiful and strange. Using Peckham folklore, he transforms the leisure grounds of the bowling green into the site of Boudicca’s suicide, a symbol of failed anti-imperialist rebellion. The ordinary space of the Rye is thickly layered with images of history and of folktale, possible and actual pasts. As Waugh writes, “if we see the things of the world anew, then, as Viktor Shklovsky so famously remarked, we might feel again their thinginess” (“Muriel Spark” 65). Dougal’s interest is thus more aesthetic than practical, and the focus on the aesthetic or the symbolic is characteristic, too, of countercultural movements in the 1960s, which invoked the “irrational and mysterious” in contrast to the bureaucratic rationality that seemed to pervade all aspects of life (McCann and Szalay 438). In its characterisation of Dougal, Spark’s narrative connects the fields of public and human relations, which seem to be invested in workerly flexibility and mobility, precisely to countercultural thinking that the “nation’s unconscious life was the real power,” and that merely to uncover it would bring about change (McCann and Szalay 438).

During one of Dougal’s rare appearances on the premises of Meadows, Meade & Grindley, the head of the typing pool Merle Coverdale remarks, “This place is becoming chaos” (67). Dougal swiftly disrupts the order of the workday – what Whyte calls “the techniques of making the corporation a smooth-working team” that are characteristic of Fordist-Taylorist efficiency regimens – and acts as a “man with strong personal convictions
who is not shy about making unorthodox decisions that will unsettle tested procedures – and his colleagues” (Whyte 128). He represents a new kind of man whom Whyte sees as crucial to the life of industry, and who interferes in radical ways with the lives of the workers. Dougal unsettles both procedures and colleagues out of their complacent acceptance of notions like “fairness” and “company values,” but the way in which he does this – and his own opportunistic approach to work – suggests something more than mere anti-establishment behaviour, although it is that, too. He compromises the basis of the social contract that relies on stability and planning for the future. He drives Weedin, the personnel manager to breakdown, Druce to murder, and Humphrey to leave Dixie at the altar. The narrator describes this scene at the start of the novel: the vicar says to Humphrey, “Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife?” to which Humphrey responds, “No … to be quite frank I won’t” (8). It is Dougal who puts these words into Humphrey’s mouth, so to speak, in an earlier encounter that is narrated towards the end of the novel:

“Wilt thou take this woman,” [Dougal] said with a deep ecclesiastical throb, “to be thai [sic] wedded waif?”

Then he put the plate aside and knelt; he was a sinister goggling bridegroom.

“No,” he declared to the ceiling, “I won’t, quite frankly.” (112)

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1 The unintended consequence of the “Arts man” post is that Dougal primes the workers to accept more flexible working conditions; with hindsight, it is possible to read that as early as 1960, Spark’s narrative could and did manifest elements of what Harvey calls “flexible accumulation,” which began to replace the Fordist-Keynesian system of political and social regulation in the 1970s and 1980s. Harvey explains that flexible accumulation “is marked by a direct confrontation with the rigidities of Fordism. It rests on flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products and patterns of consumption” (147). It is a system that capitalises on and takes further the undermining of organised labour in order “to push for more flexible work regimes and labour contracts,” and to move “towards increasing reliance upon part-time, temporary or sub-contracted work arrangements” (150).

2 Spark’s characterisation of Weedin’s immediate dislike of Dougal mirrors what William Whyte finds in his study of the “well-rounded man”: personnel men prefer administrative types to creative types (98).
Dougal’s objections to Dixie typically arise whenever Humphrey discusses her predilection to “saving,” as in the scene described earlier. Saving has a dual meaning here, applied to both money and sex. When Humphrey complains about Dixie’s fixation with money, he ends by saying “And result, she’s losing her sex” (112). Dougal likewise connects Dixie’s sexuality with money: “I wouldn’t marry her … if you paid me” (112). As critics like Michael Tratner have pointed out, ideas about money resonate in interesting ways with conceptions of gender and sexuality in the twentieth century.

Accordingly, Humphrey and Dougal’s attitudes towards Dixie’s “saving” reflect two different approaches towards economic planning in the postwar period. Humphrey, with his faith in the system and his dislike of over saving – he supports Dixie’s prudence in planning for the future, but not her total withdrawal from the social life of Peckham – fits into what Harvey has called the Fordist-Keynesian economic configuration. Harvey writes that, “The problem, as an economist like Keynes saw it, was to arrive at a set of scientific managerial strategies and state powers that would stabilize capitalism while avoiding the evident repressions and irrationalities that national socialist solutions implied” (129). During this period, which Michael Tratner dates from 1920 to roughly 1960, a “set of attitudes coalesced in discussions of economics and sexuality … to such an extent that they can be described as ‘dominant’: the Keynesian orthodoxy in economics that over saving is harmful, and the prevalent view of sexual theorists … that repression is harmful” (Tratner 6). In either case, “spending” is a way to maintain a system of circulation and increase the total amount of available energy, but this spending must also be strategic; it is in the service of rationalised state planning. Dougal, on the other hand, is acquisitive without any apparent object. He spends gratuitously, and he seems merely interested in furthering the general movement or circulation of money and people and emotion. In the novel, this is described as Dougal’s ability to “unsettle.” Spark’s text presents Dougal as a foil to the industrial relations model,
foregrounding many of the issues raised in Carter’s text, published over a decade later, about the free circulation of money and desire.

When Dougal calls Trevor Lomas a “mean well sex starved conceited low and lying L.C.C. electrician,” he is displaying his aversion to all forms of centralisation (45). He uses Trevor’s employment by the LCC (London County Council) as a way of insulting him; he is effectively telling Trevor that he is not his own man but a mere cog in the machine. He also draws a connection between Trevor’s being “sex starved” and his having a steady job. Dougal, for his part, prefers flexibility and mobility to security. Employed as Arts man for Meadows, Meade & Grindley, he manages to secure the same position at Drover Willis, their main competitor, located just across the river. Dougal, in short, is the new kind of ‘expert professional’ who emerged at the mid-century and was embraced by countercultural movements from the 1960s.

In their essay on “Literary Thinking and the New Left,” Sean McCann and Michael Szalay discuss the emergence of an alternative “vision of ‘expert professionalism’” that was embraced by countercultural movements from the 1960s (454). This professional class held out the promise “to transform the world via a refusal of managerialism” (452). The new class was interested in “autonomy, creativity, and education,” which seem to be the three conditions of Dougal’s employment (454). Unlike Humphrey, and indeed unlike the old professional class’s investment in the “‘loyalty dividend’ earned by dedicating oneself to an organization,” Dougal has no sense of company or group loyalty (453). He feels no particular commitment to either firm, playing the existing system to his benefit, and freely uses people as subjects of his human research. In his second interview with Mr Druce, for instance, Dougal repeatedly reorients himself according to the kind of man he thinks Druce is seeking: he “changed his shape and became a professor … leaned forward and became a television interviewer” (16). A few paragraphs down, “he was now a man of vision with a deformed
shoulder” (17). In his interview with Willis, Dougal, upon hearing Mr Willis’s voice, “changed his manner, for he perceived that Mr Willis was a Scot”; he plays the “solid steady Edinburgh boy” (68, 69). When the inhabitants of Peckham repeatedly refer to Dougal as the devil, it is because he becomes all things to all people. He exhibits here what, according to Michael Tratner, happens in late capitalism: the system seeks to satisfy all desires in all people at once (41). In contrast to Humphrey, whose attitude mirrors the Fordist-Keynesian configuration that seeks to stabilise capitalism, Dougal wants only to keep things moving, to unsettle. In a way, Dougal is channelling the spirit of the 1960s; his attitude towards work, his inclination towards the contingent and the flexible is, moreover, suggestive of what David Harvey has called the dynamics of a throwaway society, then beginning to be evident. At the same time, it also is almost immediately clear that whatever connection Dougal might have to any kind of counter-culture is mitigated by his overarching desire to make as much money as possible in as little time. In fact, Spark’s characterisation of him in this way suggests that anti-establishment attitudes are already open to annexation by a new kind of capitalism. Dougal embodies both of these impulses: he unsettles Peckham’s establishment – its ways of being, of thinking – only for his own gain. When, at the end of the novel, we learn he is “away off to Africa with the intention of selling tape-recorders to all the witch-doctors,” it is clear that Dougal’s beautiful and strange approach to “vision” is predicated on the same market imperatives M-O eventually took part it. He is representative of the ways “capitalism adapts to various liberations” (Tratner 37).

Earlier modes of human research that stress rational organisation may indeed create automatons, like Humphrey and Dixie, but in Spark’s text, Dougal’s vision of freely circulating workers, without any sense of stability, is perilous, particularly for women. His ability to alter other people’s experience of reality is characteristic of his Surrealist spirit, which again connects him with the incipient 1960s counterculture, but while Surrealism can
be deployed in a positive way – to destabilise dominant narratives, for example – Dougal uses it to undermine feminine subjectivity. It is also, then, a paternalistic mode: as MacLeod remarks, “surrendering the framing of one’s narrative is to be under somebody else’s control, not in somebody else’s care” (211). While Dougal is conducting his “research,” he is also culling a lot of the information he has collected to pad Maria Cheeseman’s memoirs, which he has been hired to write. In translating the experiences of Peckham’s residents into Maria’s life story, Dougal makes literal the kind of aesthetic alchemy that Highmore proposes in his book *Ordinary Lives*. Subjective experience becomes objective and collective, so that Maria eventually begins to “remember” events that happened to the past and present residents of Peckham. Here, Dougal is using his human research for his own interests, while in his official position he is (ostensibly, at least) using the data to promote workerly vision. In either case, his research is more or less exploitative, and, as Merle Coverdale’s fate illustrates, the consequences of extending patriarchal modes of observation can be quite grim indeed.

Dougal’s ability to alter other characters’ perceptions of reality is manifested in scenes throughout the novel. In an early scene, Dougal, walking on the Rye with Merle, finds himself watched by a lurking Mr Druce, and he tries to divert Merle’s attention by pointing to the sky:

“Look properly,” Dougal said, “up there. And don’t look away because Mr Druce is watching us from behind the pavilion.”

She looked at Dougal.

“Keep looking up,” he said, “at the trees with red tassels in the sky. Look where I’m pointing.”

Several people who were crossing the Rye stopped to look up at where Dougal was pointing. Dougal said to them, “A new idea. Did you see it in the papers? Planting trees and shrubs in the sky. Look there – it’s a tip of a pine.”
“I think I do see something,” said a girl. (99)

Merle tells Dougal, “You’ve unsettled me, Dougal, since you came to Peckham. I shall have a nervous breakdown, I can see it coming” (98). Dougal unsettles Merle, just as he has unsettled Weedin and will later unsettle the Franciscan Prior. But his effect on Merle is different: his production of reams of research data from Peckham that he solicits Merle to type and his persistent making-strange-ness of everyday life have destabilised her experience of reality. She is no longer able to read situations or signals. Dougal has stripped away her ability to make metaphor, so that she does not see the threat that Mr Druce – with whom she has been conducting an affair – has begun to pose to her. The narrator details three separate incidences: “Mr Druce took a breadknife from the drawer and looked at her. Then he placed the knife beside the bread on the board” (53), “Mr Druce lifted his paper-knife, toyed with it in his hand, pointed it at Merle, and put it down” (82), and finally, two pages before he finally does her in with a corkscrew, “He turned to look at her with the corkscrew pointing from his fist” (134). In each scene, the action is suspended for a moment, the scene a tableau vivant, with the narrative focussed keenly on the sharp object so that it becomes the moment’s vanishing point. The scenes are overloaded with emphasis and signification, so that the situation is almost satirical and Merle’s inaction almost ridiculous. Conversely, her reaction to Mr Druce’s half-playful, half-sinister pinching of her neck is coded in the narrative as being over the top: she screams and screams.

Dougal’s encounters with Nelly Mahone, Peckham’s tramp preacher, have a similar effect. During one of their conversations, which takes place in Paley’s scrap yard, she tells him, “Holy Mary, let me out of here. I don’t know whether I’m coming or going with you” (114). The meeting place points up Dougal’s interest in the detritus of everyday life – including Nelly – but also the ease with which he discards his objects of research once they have exhausted their use-value. Dougal persuades Nelly to become his informant, so that she
comes to tie in her informing with her street preaching: “Nelly raised up her voice and in the
same tone proclaimed, ‘Praise be to God who by sin is offended, Trevor Lomas, Collie Gould
up the Elephant with young Leslie, and by penance appeased, the exaltation of the humble
and the strength of the righteous’” (Ballad 88). Dougal’s intervention has altered Nelly’s
cosmos, so that young Leslie, Trevor Lomas and Collie Gould are right up there with god.
This shift has catastrophic effects for her; the boys, in an attempt to wrest information from
her about Dougal, break in to her flat and assault her. The scene also serves as the catalyst to
Druce’s murder of Merle Coverdale: Nelly tells the boys that Dougal “goes with Miss
Coverdale sometimes,” and this is what ultimately sets off Druce in his final scene with
Merle (96).

Throughout the novel, the goal of efficiency that underpins industrial relations in
Peckham is made manifest in its characters, who are sketched as pathological types;
Humphrey, for instance, is a “union man,” made up of union rules, while Dixie is an
obsessive saver, motivated by postwar rhetoric of renewal and improvement. The objective of
characters who submit to this type of efficiency is security – represented most clearly in
Dixie’s desire for a model home and a spin-dryer. In Spark’s novel, this kind of rational life
planning is without excitement – it “takes the sex out of” life. In contrast to this is Dougal’s
approach, motivated by a desire for individual gain in the most efficient manner, gain as an
end in itself. Dougal challenges the official and established social and economic systems,
responding to an apparent need in Peckham. The Peckhamites find him appealing because he
is, in a way, providing them with a kind of variety that they crave. Dougal, however, is driven
only by profit, and because of this, the variety that he introduces into Peckham puts some of
its most vulnerable members – women – at risk of violence. Dougal heralds the arrival of a
new type of professional, who is “the master of valuable knowledge and ability, but owes no
special debt to the public good and needs no non-market, ideological defense” (McCann and
It is possible to read, in *Ballad*, an implicit warning about an incipient culture that promotes individualism, flexibility and mobility: Dougal may be responding to a perceived social need, but his pursuit of the extraordinary takes precedence over any attempts to constrain cruelty.

Spark’s narrative ends with Humphrey’s return to Peckham to marry Dixie, suggesting that a reinstatement of the old order is preferable to the disorder sown by Dougal. There is a difference, though: as Humphrey drives past the Rye, he perceives that “for an instant [it] look[s] like a cloud of green and gold, the people seeming to ride upon it, as you might say there was another world than this” (143). This uncharacteristically hopeful ending suggests a way of attending to “the extraordinary in ordinary routines or relationships while remaining alert to the alienations that inhere in the very textures of everyday life” (Alexander 720). The novel’s final image of ordinary people walking on the Rye suggests that Spark’s text is interested in promoting the idea of everyday life as “common,” which Neal Alexander, borrowing from Raymond Williams, defines as “ordinary, vulgar, unremarkable, but what also is shared between atomized individuals and therefore potentially the basis of a community and a politics” (725-6). The space of the Rye is “common” in that it is a place where ordinary people visit or pass through every day, and it is also a shared space.

Humphrey’s vision of “another world” runs against the kind of thinking – like Dougal’s – that monetizes desire, and is rooted instead in the shared material reality of Peckham’s workers, and in its potential for a meaningful community and a politics (McCann and Szalay 438).
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