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Cheers and Jeers: Lecturer-Audience Interaction in the Socialist Movement

Anna Vaninskaya

*The moral you've caught I can hardly doubt,
Never on politics rave and shout,
Leave it to others to fight it out,
 If you would be wise.
Better, far better it is to let,
Lib' rals and Tories alone, you bet,
Unless you're willing and anxious to get,
 Two lovely black eyes!¹*

Introduction

In the nineteenth century, lectures and lecturers came in many shapes and sizes,² from a 'Greats' lecture for the Oxford University elite to the scientific lecture 'for the people', disseminating useful knowledge to the general public. 'Edutainment' lectures were particularly popular – audiences of half a thousand would gather to hear George Birkbeck's free lectures on the 'mechanical arts' in Glasgow in the 1800s, while by mid-century, thousands would flock to see the optical illusion lectures at the Polytechnic Institution in London. If public science lecturing had attained the status of visual spectacle, literary, artistic and political lecturing turned international: big names such as Charles Dickens, Matthew Arnold and Oscar Wilde went on lecture tours to America (as did hundreds of lesser names such as the Findlater sisters), while Americans like Henry George made highly influential trips in the other direction.

The types of speakers were as varied as the types of lectures. There were central committees supplying professional speakers for local venues, but also small armies of itinerant individual demonstrators who made a precarious living dragging around their cumbersome equipment, and star lecturers who shared their wisdom for free. Oxford fellows interested in science would lecture about their passion on the side, while successful speakers from one religious or educational circuit (of Unitarians or Quakers, or learned, Lit. and Phil. or county antiquarian societies) would be invited to

¹ Music Hall song (Charles Coborn, 'Two Lovely Black Eyes!', 1886).

² There is a very large secondary literature dealing with different aspects of Victorian lecturing. For two important kinds see Bernard Lightman's *Victorian Popularizers of Science: Designing Nature for New Audiences* (Chicago UP, 2007) and Lawrence Goldman's *Dons and Workers: Oxford and Adult Education since 1850* (Clarendon Press, 1995).

contribute to another. Clergymen had been engaged in lecturing throughout the nineteenth century, teaching local history, archaeology, geology and natural history (though rarely touching politics and economics). Some were motivated by religion, others saw lecturing as a parish duty, and community education as part of the clergyman's vocation. At the turn of the twentieth century they supplemented regional university staff, or contributed to the rural tutorial movement, while in the cities, lower middle-class self-improvers like the fictional clerk Leonard Bast attended evening lectures by literary and popular scientific speakers.

National lecturing circuits also developed early on to service the Mechanics Institutes, which could draw on a pool of amateurs as well as professional speakers from the universities. Later in the nineteenth century these linked up with the University Extension Movement, which generated its own national infrastructure, and by the early twentieth century a whole world of adult education lecturing – the Workers' Educational Association most famously, but also Labour Colleges, as well as women's higher education bodies – had come into being. Children were not left out of account: Socialist Sunday school lecturers in the 1900s were provided with manuals and instructions on content and lecture organisation. Some of this content was generated by socialists such as Edward Carpenter, who himself started out as an astronomy lecturer in the Extension Movement. More was supplied by famous lecturers of the Ethical, Positivist, Secularist and Moral Education movements, such as Frederick James Gould.

Carpenter left Extension lecturing because it was wrecking his health. Here is how he describes it in his autobiography *My Days and Dreams*,³ in the long chapter devoted to University Extension in the 1870s:

As long as the lectures went on I was in perpetual suffering with my eyes, and anxiety - sometimes being really unable to prepare the work before me. Then on this came the strain of lecturing - traveling to a place with a great box of apparatus, arriving there three or four hours before the time of the meeting, getting all one's apparatus and experiments ready (in some wretched schoolroom with *no* assistance), having often in those days to make my oxygen gas myself for the lantern; to rush out when all was ready for a cup of tea, to return in time to take an hour's preliminary class, and then

³ Edward Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams: Being Autobiographical Notes* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1916).

to give the lecture; all this was terribly exhausting. But it by no means ended there. After the lecture some local manufacturer and patron would carry one off to his residence for the night, there to meet a few friends at supper, and to talk and be talked to till the small hours of the morning. When one got to bed - a vibrating mass of nerves - sleep was out of the question. There were all the pupils and their faces, and their needs and their personalities; there were the tiresome patrons and committee people, in endless dance on my brain. Often and often I never slept a wink - only to get up the next day and go through a similar round. Often and often when I got back to my lodgings I had to lie on my back on the sofa for hours - not even then to sleep - but simply to rest and soothe the nerve-pain throughout my body. I felt my life was becoming wrecked and I remember at last swearing a great oath to myself that somehow or other I would get out of it and find my health again.

He also describes another feature of lecturing that one does not usually associate with its educational variety, but that loomed very large for the political lecturer of any stripe:

One term ... I was lecturing at Barnsley. The place was a little local theatre, unused at the time; but about the middle of the term it was taken by a traveling company, and we had to move into another building. The last evening of our occupation, some scenery was already up, and I, having affixed my star diagrams to the shifts and side-scenes, was lecturing from the stage when a belated stranger, a rough navvy or collier - no doubt attracted by the theatrical bills already out - came stumping down the middle gangway and ultimately dropped into a seat. He remained quiet for a good time; and then - his patience fairly giving out - he rose up and spoke. 'Look 'ere,' he said, 'I've been sittin' 'ere 'alf an hour - and I haven't understood a *word* of what you've been saying, *and I don't believe you do neither.*'

I felt for the poor man - I deeply sympathized. He had come in no doubt on the expectation of a theatrical treat - got in too without paying at the door, which was *nuts*, as they say - and now - what had he come to?

There was a scene. Everybody jumped round on their seats. The local Secretary - a tiny little man, a Frenchman, a dentist - approached the bold stranger.

'You must sit down,' he said.

'*Shan't* sit down!'

'Den you must go out of de room.'

'*Shan't* go out of the room.'

'Den I shall have to *make* you.'

The situation was too ludicrous - this tiny Gallic David and this huge and beery Goliath! What might have happened we know not. Fortunately the stranger took the better part, and said -

'I'm sure I don't want to stay 'ere any longer' - and left us with contempt to our Astronomy.

The Socialist Lecture

The altercation with a member of the audience, or more precisely, the exchange with the heckler, was a familiar pastime for any political or religious street corner orator of the late-Victorian and Edwardian period, whether suffragette or socialist, Tory or Liberal, Secularist or Salvation Army.

The street lecture or the public meeting address was by definition an interactive event, and often the

lecturer gave back as good as he, or she, got. We lack a proper history of heckling,⁴ but we know that the audience's engagement could range from provocative questioning to pelting with rotten vegetables, while the speaker in turn could respond with anything from a witty retort to a heavy-handed insult. In the lore of the *fin de siècle* socialist movement, George Bernard Shaw, who could speechify non-stop for three hours, was known to court hecklers, countering their 'yells of rage' with his renowned wit;

Figure 1: Stephen Cribb, photograph of George Bernard Shaw addressing dock workers, included in Archibald Henderson, *George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Works* (Cincinnati: Stewart and Kidd Co., 1911), p. 144, facing page illustration. Image in public domain.

while William Morris, who found public speaking an uphill battle, simply grew infuriated, and was known to growl 'Damfool! Damfool!'⁵

Figure 2: Walter Crane, 'William Morris speaking from a wagon in Hyde Park, May 1 1894', pencil sketch included in Walter Crane, *William Morris to Whistler: Papers and Addresses on Art and Craft and the Commonwealth* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1911), p. 14. Used by permission of the Working Class Movement Library, Manchester.

Audiences had more methods at their disposal. When Ramsay MacDonald gave an anti-war speech in Leicester in 1918 he was first drowned out by strains of *Rule Britannia* and then attacked with a flag by retired soldiers. He had to be escorted from the scene by the police (and eventually lost his seat). The audience could also turn against itself: people trying to ask questions at National War Aims Committee meetings during the Great War were shouted down by cries of 'pacifist' and 'coward,' and it was not unknown for a public meeting to end in a fight between adherents of different political factions. Audience abuse took not only verbal and physical, but print form. It was not just to each other's face – during the lecture itself or in the give-and-take afterwards – that opinions were aired, they could also be made public in newspapers and autobiographies, or shared privately in letters and diaries. Lectures by eminent persons were routinely reported in the national

⁴ Although Jon Lawrence's *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford UP, 2009) does touch on the topic.

⁵ Dan H. Laurence, ed. *Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters 1894-1910* (London: Max Reinhardt, 1972): 761 - letter to G. K. Chesterton of 1 March 1908; see also 'Shaw's Friends,' *Time*, December 14 1936 – review of *Morris as I Knew Him*.

and local press, sometimes sparking an exchange of hostilities in print, such as the flurry of letters that followed Morris's lectures in Manchester in 1883 and 1884, the latter of which resulted in the dismissal of the lecture organiser from the Manchester City Council.

It is one of the clichés of the historiography that 'preaching the Word' was the primary function of socialist bodies in this period, and lectures were indeed at the centre of late-Victorian and Edwardian socialist propaganda activity. Debates about the nature of the intended audience: whether metropolitan middle-class, ruling elite, or Northern labourer, determined socialist policy and the formation of various societies and organisations, for education, agitation and the making of working-class socialists involved speech-making of a very different sort from the kind practiced in Parliament. Delivery styles were analysed: Shaw, in his capacity as a popular professional orator, wrote to H. G. Wells during his brief stint in the Fabian Society advising him on his posture and voice projection, and explaining how he too could become an 'effective public speaker' or 'platform athlete in propaganda.'⁶ The cockney novelist and Fabian Edwin Pugh explained that 'One has only to stand in a crowd gathered round a speaker to discover that when he deals in mere figures his listeners yawn; but when he gives them visions they are rapt in attention'.⁷ But apathy was not the only problem. Audiences could be downright hostile, and making socialists of people against their will was a tough business. It was no wonder if the street-corner orator, hoarse from responding to the taunts and heckles, lost his patience – he was not dealing with ideal or implied readers in a text, but with real listeners present in the body in the street or lecture hall.

But audience recalcitrance only led to a renewal of efforts on the socialists' part. In a single year – 1891 - ninety Fabian speakers gave a total of 1,400 lectures at public meetings of every imaginable stripe,⁸ and they were but one sect, and not a particularly numerous one at that, of the broad church radical movement. Once one factors in all the anarchists, Social Democrats, trade

⁶ *Letters*, 766 - letter to Wells of 22 March 1908.

⁷ Edwin Pugh, 'The Figure Habit,' *New Age* 13 Jun. 1907: 103.

⁸ Brian Simon, *Education and the Labour Movement 1870-1920* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1965): 33; see also Manton, *Socialism and Education* 153.

union organisers, Independent Labour Party activists, and the like, one can begin to picture what Wells called the welter of ‘gatherings and talks,’ ‘meetings and conferences,’ ‘the comings and goings of audiences and supporters that were like the eddy-driven drift of paper in the street’⁹.

Even an otherwise busy person like Morris managed to deliver up to five lectures a week during the peak years of his activity in the mid 1880s, skimming up and down the country along the railways, crossing paths with the Russian anarchist Prince Kropotkin or the secularist turned socialist turned theosophist Annie Besant. To get a sense of the extent of this world one need only thumb the hundreds, perhaps thousands of ephemeral publications with titles like *Lectures Delivered to the Young Socialist Guild*, or take a look at the *Commonweal* ‘Lecture Diary’ and listings of ‘Open-air Propaganda’ with times and places, or the *Clarion* reports of branch life in its ‘Notes from the Front’ section, with lists of meetings and lectures by town, and advertisements of bazaars and fairs. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that every issue of every newspaper of the socialist and labour movements from the 1880s until the Great War (not to mention local papers and national papers such as *The Times*), carried lecture notices. Pamphlets advised potential converts who wanted ‘to help the Socialist movement’ to become ‘public speaker[s],’ ‘to form an audience indoors, or make a crowd at an out-door meeting.’ The lectures themselves, often accompanied by bands and choirs as a kind of opening or closing act, could take place anywhere: at Hyde Park corner, at the South Place Institute, St. James’s Hall, Essex Hall, or Caxton Hall, at any number of Free Trade, Town, and other

⁹ H. G. Wells, *Ann Veronica* (1909). Wells also left documentary accounts of such meetings, such as this one from *New Worlds for Old: A Plain Account of Modern Socialism*, 1908 (London: Constable, 1912), in the chapter on ‘Revolutionary Socialism’: ‘My memory ... carries me to the dusky largeness of a great meeting in Queen’s Hall, and I see again the back of Mr. Hyndman’s head moving quickly, as he receives and answers questions. It was really one of the strangest and most interesting meetings I have ever attended. It was a great rally of the Social Democratic Federation, and the place—floor, galleries and platform—was thick but by no means overcrowded with dingy, earnest people. There was a great display of red badges and red ties, and many white faces, and I was struck by the presence of girls and women with babies. It was more like the Socialist meetings of the popular novel than any I had ever seen before. In the chair that night was Lady Warwick, that remarkable intruder into the class conflict, a blond lady, rather expensively dressed, so far as I could judge, about whom the atmosphere of class consciousness seemed to thicken. Her fair hair, her floriferous hat, told out against the dim multitudinous values of the gathering unquenchably; there were moments when one might have fancied it was simply a gathering of village tradespeople about the lady patroness, and at the end of the proceedings, after the red flag had been waved, after the “Red Flag” had been sung by a choir and damply echoed by the audience, some one moved a vote of thanks to the Countess in terms of familiar respect that completed the illusion. Mr. Hyndman’s lecture was entitled “In the Rapids of Revolution”...’.

public Halls, assembly rooms, theatres, schools, working-men's and Radical clubs, on wagonettes in fields in rain or shine, at William Morris's Hammersmith coach house, or on the backs of the Clarion Vans, the Red Vans of the English Land Restoration League and the Yellow Vans of the Land Nationalisation Society that travelled the country holding meetings and distributing literature.

Outdoor lectures were generally free, with audiences ranging from a score to tens of thousands, while indoor ones usually charged admission, though star speakers easily got a full house with minimum advertising. Female lecturers were just as popular as male ones. Some of the most effective of the first generation of socialist itinerant propagandists were women like Annie Besant, Katharine Conway, Margaret McMillan, and Caroline Martyn: they and many others like them eclipsed their male counterparts on the platform. There was also a constant movement between centre and periphery: important activists (e.g. Blatchford, McMillan, Alex Gossip) relocated to London from Manchester, Bradford, or Glasgow; lecturers and branch organisers dispersed from London to every town and hamlet across the land.

The socialist lecture circuit was thus not much different from any number of other religious, political, educational or entertainment circuits: it was the product of a national network of socialist societies, centrally based in London or a handful of other cities, with local branches throughout the country, and varying regional distributions. Orators from one society would lecture for most others; verbatim reports of set-piece debates between socialists and prominent ideological opponents like Charles Bradlaugh would be published, and lectures of all kinds were often reprinted as pamphlets by the various socialist society presses, or as essay collections by more mainstream publishers. This was typical of a culture where academic lectures, for instance, routinely formed the basis for printed works of scholarship; but while a Friedrich Max Müller lecture looked much the same in print as a Morris one, the original live setting could not have been more different. Morris spoke to his share of dignified middle-class audiences, but he also lectured at political meetings accompanied by songs

and music, surrounded by banners and rowdy hecklers.¹⁰

In the decade from the mid eighties to the mid nineties he left meticulous records of his reception by various audiences, and reading these accounts gives a good taste of the ups and downs of an itinerant speaker's punishing schedule. Morris's lecture tour of Scotland, including all the major cities and a number of villages, was plagued by bad turn-out due to inclement weather; a few months later over the course of five days he lectured in Manchester, Bolton, Blackburn, Liverpool, and Rochdale.¹¹ He got his share of cheers of course, especially up North, in fact, he 'couldn't help contrasting our cockneys much to their disadvantage with the northerners' (*Diary* 54). 'I had about a dozen [Manchester working men] round me after my Saturday's address,' he wrote, 'and we had a brisk conversation' and [on another occasion] 'very eager discussion.'¹² Generally, Morris enjoyed question time, as it was an opportunity to find out 'what the audience thought about Socialism,' and tea 'with enquirers and carpers ... [was] a usual feature of these gatherings' (Frow 17-8). In Sheffield, his lectures were well attended and well received, 'indeed I have never stood before a more sympathetic audience.' In Liverpool 'the hall was crowded with an audience mostly of working men, who not only listened with very great attention, but took up all the points ... with very hearty applause.' They were 'eager to ask questions' and to 'learn.' The eight hundred-strong working-class audience in Norwich 'seemed to be quite in sympathy with the movement,'¹³ and a few years later the Norwich branch welcomed him and the other speakers with 'singing and recitation, and agreeable converse generally'; speeches were 'received with much enthusiasm,' and the questions demonstrated that the working-class audience 'took up every point in the [difficult]

¹⁰ See Alan Bacon, 'William Morris's Lectures and the Question of Audience: A Study of the Versions of "Art and Labour",' *Yale University Library Gazette* 58 (1984), 163-80: 'In revising his address to a middle-class audience in Leeds for the working class in Glasgow, Morris simplified his rhetoric from literary invective to a straight-forward, less colourful prose.' See also Tony Pinkney's *William Morris in Oxford: The Campaigning Years, 1879-1895* for Morris's speeches and audience interaction.

¹¹ Morris's *Commonweal* reports 'Socialism Militant in Scotland' and 'In and About Cottonopolis' in *Political Writings* 352-6, 390-3.

¹² Morris's letter to Andreas Scheu of 16 July 1885 (Kelvin, *Letters* 2: 443-4).

¹³ 'Socialism in the Provinces' in Morris, *Political Writings* 128-30.

lecture.’ They did ‘not come to stare or loaf, but to listen.’¹⁴ Especially exciting was a meeting on a ‘waggonette’ in front of an audience of ten thousand, which opened with the singing of ‘No Master’ by the ‘comrades of the Branch,’ and competed with a Salvation Army band.¹⁵

The members of these audiences left their own recollections: one branch report described an ‘enthusiastic reception,’ audience participation in the discussion, and the conversion of four new members: ‘We closed as usual with singing.’¹⁶ The reaction to another of Morris’s lectures was described by a listener thus: ‘we workmen ... soon realised the presence of a champion, forgot ourselves, and frequently burst into rounds of applause.’¹⁷ Charles Rowley, founder of the Ancoats Brotherhood, remembered how Morris ‘lectured for us at Ancoats in his Socialistic days to enthusiastic audiences of nearly a thousand It was delightful to watch his patience when the same old questions were asked by labouring men, or his vehemence when flooring some well-to-do jabberer.’¹⁸ James Leatham, an SDF activist, and John Bruce Glasier, future chairman of the ILP, recalled Morris’s preaching in their memoirs:

He was speaking from a lorry pitched on a piece of waste land close to the Ship Canal [wrote Leatham], his whole environment probably as distasteful to him as possible. It was a wild March morning, and he would not have been asked to speak out of doors, but he expressed a desire to do so; and so there he was, talking quietly but strenuously, drawing a laugh every now and then by some piece of waggish wisdom from the undulating crowd, of working men mostly, who stood in the hollow and the slopes before him. There would be quite two thousand of them....In spite of the bitter cold of the morning, scarcely a man moved from the crowd...¹⁹

One of those present in that crowd poured his response to Morris’s lecture into verse:

Like an archangel in the morning sun
He stood with a high message, and men heard
The rousing syllables, and scarcely stirred,
Rough though they were, until the tale was done.
Then there arose full many a doubting one
Who craved interpretation of a word

¹⁴ Morris, *Political Writings* 383-5.

¹⁵ Morris, *Political Writings* 128, 383-4.

¹⁶ Qtd. in Morris, *Socialist Diary* 34.

¹⁷ Qtd. in Yeo, ‘A New Life’ 29.

¹⁸ Qtd. Edmund and Ruth Frow, *William Morris in Manchester and Salford* (Salford: Working Class Movement Library, 1996): 10.

¹⁹ James Leatham, *William Morris: Master of Many Crafts*, 3rd ed. (Peterhead: Clerkhill Press, 1908): 125-126.

So big with meaning, but so long deferred:
And the great Poet scorned to answer none.²⁰

‘Sick of talking to you’

Reporting lectures such as these in *Commonweal* some years earlier, Morris concluded that ‘everywhere people are willing and eager to listen to Socialists’²¹; but to his diary he confided a very different story. Of a set of lectures in 1887 he wrote, ‘I thought the applause rather hollow they seemed to me a very discouraging set of men The frightful ignorance and want of impressibility of the average English workman floors me at times’; ‘My Socialism was gravely listened to [by the audience at a Radical Club] ... but taken with no enthusiasm; and in fact however simply one puts the case for Socialism one always rather puzzles an audience...’; and on another occasion: ‘the audience was all made up of labourers and their wives: they were very quiet and attentive ... but I doubt if most of them understood anything I said I wonder sometimes if people will remember in times to come to what a depth of degradation the ordinary English workman has been reduced.’²² The diary entries are peppered with admissions of ‘dead’ or ‘wretched’ failures, each providing a ‘fresh opportunity (if I needed it) of gauging the depths of ignorance and consequent incapacity of following an argument which possesses the uneducated averagely stupid person.’

These opinions were not meant for the ears of the stupid people in question, but there were those in the socialist movement who made a habit of saying such things out loud. H. M. Hyndman, the leader of the Social Democratic Federation, was notorious for taunting his listeners from the platform ‘with their apathy, indifference and ignorance.’ In his autobiographical account of ‘speaking at public meetings in halls and in the open air,’ he painted a picture of working-class crowds in the East End of London, at once hopelessly debauched and sharply inquisitive. He accused them to their faces of being ‘idiots,’ incapable of understanding their own power, ‘destitute

²⁰ Qtd. in Frow, *William Morris* 23, from the *Clarion* of 31 March 1894.

²¹ ‘Socialism in the Provinces’ in Morris, *Political Writings* 128-30.

²² Morris, *Socialist Diary* 23, 26, 33, 42.

of any sense' to put up as they did with their conditions of life instead of organising politically; his disgust with the 'beer-swilling, gin-absorbing' public of the Radical Clubs is apparent.²³

Hyndman was never one to hide his real views: on separate occasions he called the working class 'rotten,' 'reactionary,' 'ignorant,' 'conceited,' 'degraded,' 'embruted,' 'stolid,' 'apathetic, addicted to gambling and drink ... [and] indifferent to their own welfare': 'the English working classes are not nice people to work for.'²⁴ In 1887 he identified the calm acceptance of references to 'their apathy and ignorance, which I do not believe would be put up with by the men of any other nation,' as a notable characteristic of the English workers.²⁵ But docility would have been a prerequisite in order to withstand lectures by the likes of James Leatham, the bulk of which were devoted to the chastisement of the 'men in this hall' -- for their belief in the necessity of capitalism, their acceptance of the status quo, their trades unionism, their selfish thriftiness, and their acquiescence in half-measures like temperance, vegetarianism, and Co-operation. It was quite in the order of things for Leatham to tell his listeners: 'you prefer the man with money to the man with brains and good intentions. You snub your political friends, and send them away sick at heart, and despairing of you and your cause. It is little wonder if at times we get sick of you, get sick of talking to you....'²⁶

No socialist leader failed to leave behind a record of insults, even if they were not always delivered in the lecture hall. Beatrice Webb confided her contemptuous thoughts to her diary, but the influential propagandist Robert Blatchford asked his intended audience outright in his best-seller *Merrie England*, 'Is there any logic in you, John Smith? Is there any perception in you? Is there any sense in you?'²⁷ To his friend and *Clarion* cofounder Alex Thompson he wrote: 'Are these creatures

²³ See Hyndman, *Record* 354-6, 342-4.

²⁴ The quotations are from a letter and articles in *Justice* and the *Challenge*, all written in 1901: qtd. in Yeo, 'A New Life' 53; qtd. in Raphael Samuel, ed., *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity: History and Politics*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 1989): 125; qtd. in Johnson, *Social Democratic Politics* 150.

²⁵ H. M. Hyndman, 'The English Workers as They Are,' *Contemporary Review* Jul.-Dec. 1887: 135. For Hyndman's notorious tactlessness see Johnson, *Social Democratic Politics* 149-50.

²⁶ Leatham, *Class War* 3, 5.

²⁷ Blatchford, *Merrie* 200.

worth fighting for; are they fit to fight alongside of? By God, Alec, I feel ashamed. I do. I feel degraded. We cannot win battles with such a rabble rout.’²⁸ To J. B. Glasier he complained of their selfishness, ‘apathy, ignorance, stupidity, and meanness.’²⁹ Glasier himself, a veteran of the lecture circuit, described workers as ‘dunderheads and donkeys ... sneaks, flunkeys, cowards, traitors and nincompoops’; John Trevor, founder of the Labour Church, called them ‘docile, idle and stupid’³⁰; H. G. Wells berated ‘the ignorance, the want of courage, the stupid want of imagination of the very poor, too shy and timid and clumsy to face any change they can evade!’³¹

But the poor got their own back, not just in real life, but in literature. Robert Tressell’s Edwardian working class novel, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, not only featured what is probably the quintessential scene of abuse by the audience – the stoning, nearly to death, of an itinerant socialist lecturer – but also included the whole spectrum of responses from jeering, heckling, laughter, and catcalls, to witty interchange, cries of ‘it’s a lot of bloody rot,’ questioning interruptions, and indignant broadsides, the latter from the increasingly exasperated socialist characters. Frank Owen, the socialist hero and house decorator by trade, periodically harangues his workmates during the lunch hour, or is persuaded to lecture from a stepladder for their entertainment. The ensuing descriptions of interaction between speaker and audience, very likely autobiographical, are probably the best evidence we have, in the absence of actual recordings, of the dynamics of a hundred other such meetings in real life. But one should not neglect the stylization: note, for instance, the difference between the fluent literary English of the working-class lecturer and the ungrammatical phrases and dropped aitches of his anti-socialist audience.

On one occasion Owen proceeds as follows:

‘In some of my previous lectures I have endeavoured to convince you that money is in itself of no value and of no real use whatever. In this I am afraid I have been rather unsuccessful.’

‘Not a bit of it, mate,’ cried Crass, sarcastically. ‘We all agrees with it.’

²⁸ Qtd. in L. Thompson, *Robert Blatchford* 137.

²⁹ Qtd. in Manton, *Socialism and Education* 16.

³⁰ Qtd. in Manton, *Socialism and Education* 16.

³¹ H. G. Wells, *This Misery of Boots: Reprinted with Alterations from the Independent Review, December, 1905* (London: The Fabian Society, 1907): 34.

‘Ear, ‘ear,’ shouted Easton. ‘If a bloke was to come in ‘ere now and offer to give me a quid – I’d refuse it!’ (261)

A bit later:

‘... Therefore while the money system lasts we are bound to have poverty and all the evils it brings in its train.’

‘Oh, of course everybody’s an idjit except you,’ sneered Crass, who was beginning to feel rather fogged.

‘I rise to a pint of order,’ said Easton.

‘And I rise to order a pint,’ cried Philpot.

‘Order what the bloody ‘ell you like,’ remarked Harlow, ‘so long as I ‘aven’t got to pay for it.’

‘Mine’s a pint of porter,’ observed the man on the pail.

‘The pint is,’ proceeded Easton, ‘when does the lecturer intend to explain to us what is the real cause of poverty.’

‘Ear, ‘ear,’ cried Harlow. ‘That’s what *I* want to know, too.’

‘And what *I* should like to know is, who is supposed to be givin’ this ‘ere lecture?’ inquired the man on the pail.

‘Why, Owen, of course,’ replied Harlow.

‘Well, why don’t you try to keep quiet for a few minutes and let ‘im get on with it?’

‘The next B—r wot interrupts,’ cried Philpot, rolling up his shirt-sleeves and glaring threateningly round upon the meeting. ‘The next b—r wot interrupts goes out through the bloody winder!’

At this, everybody pretended to be very frightened...

‘Poverty,’ resumed the lecturer, ‘consists in a shortage of the necessaries of life – or rather, of the benefits of civilisation.’

‘You’ve said that about a ‘undred times before,’ snarled Crass.

‘I know I have; and I have no doubt I shall have to say it about five hundred times more before you understand what it means.’

‘Get on with the bloody lecture,’ shouted the man on the pail. ‘Never mind arguin’ the point.’

‘Well, keep horder, can’t you?’ cried Philpot, fiercely, ‘and give the man a chance.’

‘All these things are produced in the same way,’ proceeded Owen... (265-6)

And still later:

‘All these people help to consume the things produced by labour. We will now divide them into separate classes. Those who help to produce; those who do nothing, those who do harm, and those who are engaged in unnecessary work.’

‘And,’ sneered Crass, ‘those who are engaged in unnecessary talk.’ (268)

On another occasion the housepainters arrange a mock lecture:

Figure 3: Robert Tressell, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (London: Flamingo, 1993), p. 468.

and the ‘chairman’ promises to bash out the brains of anyone who ventures to disturb the meeting

with his hammer-cum-gavel (471). Nevertheless, following a particularly intricate passage about the change from chattel slavery to feudalism to capitalism, the speaker is interrupted with a cry of ‘I believe you must ‘ave swollered a bloody dictionary’ (472). When the lecture proceeds to an explanation of the nationalisation of the railways and the fate of the shareholders, Crass interrupts: “‘They could all be knocked on the ‘ead, I suppose’... “Or go to the workhouse,” said Slyme. “Or to ‘ell,” suggested the man behind the moat.’ (480). During a lull in the question and answer session, the chairman asks sardonically, ‘Is there any more questions? ... Now is your chance to get some of your own back, but don’t hall speak at once’ (497).

Numerous similar scenes pepper the novel, but they are not there solely for comic effect. Every jeer from the fictional audience is a reminder of the very real difficulties and failures a socialist activist like Tressell himself had to face. From the 1890s members of certain socialist bodies were urged ‘to ‘permeate’ their workplaces ... and to compile lists of speakers willing to cycle up to 50 miles at the weekends to address public meetings in towns and villages with no socialist organisations.’³² The town dwellers in the novel receive just such a visit, but the hostility and violence with which the visiting lecturers meet dampen the hopes of the home-grown agitators. The speaker who gets seriously injured by a stone turns renegade and hires himself out as an orator to the Liberals. He gives up trying to ‘reason with [the workers], to uplift them, to teach them the way to higher things.’ They have never had an ‘independent thought in their lives’, he tells one of the novel’s heroes; they are savages and beasts: ‘The only things they feel any real interest in are beer, football, betting and [sex].’ They are the enemy of those who try to help them. When he served his fellow workmen out of love and ‘sought to teach them how to break their chains’ they hated and injured him, when he helped their masters to rob them they respected him. The renegade’s predicament would have sounded familiar to numerous real-life activists for the cause. But unlike

³² Stephen Ingle, ‘English Ethical Socialism,’ Language, Communication, and Culture Conference, Beja, Portugal, 24 Nov. 2004.

James Leatham's ideal agitator, whose 'hopes [are] dashed again and again,' who is abused and mocked and 'plunged in despair and doubt,' but does not let his 'hopes and [his] desires go,' the traitor has lost all faith in the people's potential for enlightenment.³³ Frank Owen nearly follows suit. Like Hyndman, Blatchford, and Leatham, he is forever being appalled by the behaviour of the workers. Instead of listening to him and trying to understand things for themselves, they prefer to believe the propaganda of their masters: 'a flock of foolish sheep [who have] placed themselves under the protection of a pack of ravening wolves.'³⁴ When he expresses his indignation with his audience he is merely countering abuse with abuse.

Conclusion

A description of audience reaction very much in the vein of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* was offered by a contributor to the *New Age* in 1908, in an article called 'The Pathos of the Poll.'³⁵ A working-class crowd gathers in the 'Market-place in front of the Town Hall' to hear the results of a poll. They cheer the Liberal and Tory candidates, then there is a

silence, this time broken by laughter from various parts of the great concourse. Then came the final figures; an insignificant total. It was the poll of the Socialist, and the crowd booed! Booed and jeered; rocked with laughter at such a huge joke; exercised their wit on the subject. It was great! 'Should think that'll about finish t' Socialists!'

The crowd is poor and overworked, yet it exults when it is told by the 'victors' that the

'exhausted seedling of rampant Socialism' had been strangled ... that the people had some common sense, and would not have 'this Socialistic twaddle rammed down their throats.' ... Not five minutes after, the representatives of the "exhausted seedling" were on the market-ground. The red flags were held aloft, and from a humble chair it was announced that that meeting was the first of the campaign for next November.

No sooner are they knocked down than the socialist lecturers rise again. And no matter how many of them shared Ramsay MacDonald's perception that, as he once told an ILP meeting, 'We can talk

³³ Leatham, *Class War* 16.

³⁴ Tressell, *RTP* 541.

³⁵ A. W. Humphrey, 'The Pathos of the Poll,' *New Age*, November 26, 1908, p. 90. Cf. Blatchford, *Merrie England*, 9-10.

socialism seriously to [the man in the street] and we will likely disgust him,³⁶ many more believed that the show, or rather, the lecture, must go on.

³⁶ Qtd. in Stephen Coleman, 'William Morris and 'Education Towards Revolution': 'Making Socialists' versus 'Putting Them in their Place,' *Journal of the William Morris Society* 11:1 (1994): 53.