

Title	Robert Tressell's The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists
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Publication date	2010
Original Citation	Meade, Rosie (2010) 'Robert Tressell's The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists', in Fiona Dukelow and Órla O'Donovan (eds) Mobilising Classics, Reading Radical Writing in Ireland, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp.54-71. isbn: 9780719080180. https://doi.org/10.7765/9780719095016.00009
Type of publication	Book chapter
Link to publisher's version	https://www.manchesterhive.com/display/9780719095016/9780719095016.00009.xml - 10.7765/9780719095016.00009
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Download date	2026-11-01 05:09:21
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/16772



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Citation: Meade, Rosie (2010) 'Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*', in Fiona Dukelow and Órla O'Donovan (eds) *Mobilising Classics, Reading Radical Writing in Ireland*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp.54-71.

Final Accepted Version

Robert Tressell's 'The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists'

Rosie Meade

With their recent and much feted academic text '*The New Spirit of Capitalism*' Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005a: 162) explore, with particular reference to contemporary France, what it is that 'justifies people's commitment to capitalism' and 'renders that commitment attractive' despite the obvious absurdity of the system itself. In the early years of the 20th Century the Irish born sign-writer Robert Noonan (1870-1911), using the pseudonym Robert Tressell, undertook a similar task. Posing as novelist rather than social researcher he described and, crucially, *explained* the miserable circumstances and political acquiescence of tradesmen in Mugsborough or as it is more commonly known, Hastings in South-East England. In this 'town of about eighty thousand inhabitants' of 'fair outward appearance', the majority 'existed in a state of perpetual poverty which in many cases bordered on destitution' (Tressell, 2004: 740-41)¹. Tragically, his was no tale of working class heroism or defiance; instead we find a class of people so deluded and defeated that their real scorn is saved for the socialists in their midst. The abiding power of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* lies in its explanation of why this was and continues to be so. It offers a peerless depiction of 'Hegemony' detailing how, in the home, the workplace and throughout this Edwardian society, oppression was sustained by the interaction of coercion and consent. Tressell's narrative also anticipated and illustrated what would later emerge as key themes in critical social theory during the 20th and 21st centuries; the culture industry critique, false consciousness, the place of the intellectual in social struggle and, the meaning and political value of resistance.

¹ Working class people are in Tressell's view society's real Philanthropists, hence the title, because they abandon their social, economic and political rights without due consideration of their real interests.

In the following pages I try to explain why I regard *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (*TRTP*) as a classic activist text, focusing on what I consider to be its most compelling themes. Doubtless, many readers will feel little connection to either the historical setting or to the abject living conditions that it describes – in our time the anodyne phrase ‘social exclusion’ trumps ‘poverty’ in policy and public discourses. More problematically, *TRTP* can seem a demoralising read, perpetuating the kind of ‘dead end’ analysis found in so much sociological writing; a litany of societal flaws or shortcomings is presented but too little is said about the political organisation and strategic thinking necessary to overcome them. Although the book ends with a rousing testament to the inevitable victory of socialism – ‘from these ruins was surely growing the glorious fabric of the Co-operative Commonwealth. Mankind awakening from the long night of bondage and mourning.’ (Tressell, 2004: 738) – it seems at best a flight into fantasy as the content of preceding pages could only engender the opposite conclusion.

As a fan of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, I cannot really pretend that it has had a profound influence over the ideas and positions adopted by Irish social movements since its publication in 1914. In Britain its political status is legendary, where by virtue of its popularity among WW2 soldiers and navy personnel it is often claimed – somewhat extravagantly - that it ‘won the ‘45 election for Labour’ (Harker, 2003: 141). Its place in the public culture is also assured; cited as the ‘favourite book’ of Tony Benn, Ricky Tomlinson (alias Jim Royle) and the significant numbers of readers who voted it to Number 72 in the Big Read charts of 2003². Unusually it has breached the artificial gap between the political and cultural spheres, and while certainly not a mass market favourite it has won readers and listeners who might never voluntarily pick up *Das Kapital*. Noonan’s singular contribution was to theorise through ‘art’ and to daringly presume that his kind of life and his kind of understandings might have broader resonance. Raymond Williams (1983: 251) describes the book as an enduring testament to the importance and utility of ‘theory’, demonstrating that ‘experience alone will not teach us’. But cultural resources, be they novels, poems or songs, are also vital reservoirs of identity, hope and imagination, and *TRTP*, while never abandoning its commitment to story-telling, is ultimately a moral call to activism.

² In 2008 BBC Radio 4 ran a three part serialisation of *TRTP* starring Johnny Vegas and, bizarrely, John Prescott MP.

Robert and me

Although there is some uncertainty about his origins, it is likely that Robert Noonan was born in Dublin, the son of retired RIC man Samuel Croker and Mary/Maria Noone/Noonan (see Ball, 1979; Harker, 2003). During his late teens, Robert made his way to South Africa, via Liverpool, where he learned his trade as a painter decorator. During his time in South Africa he married and divorced Elizabeth Hartel and they had a daughter, Kathleen. He also developed the pro-Boer sympathies that may have led to his eventual deportation from the territory. Whether by choice or by force Robert and Kathleen arrived in London in 1901. It seems to have been an unhappy period in his life as the family experienced great financial hardship and poverty. They later moved to Hastings, which, somewhat ironically, was famous as a 'health resort' (Harker, 2003; 11). Despite being renowned for his considerable skill and artistry, his employment record was chequered and he was afflicted by chronic ill health – possibly the early stages of TB. It is also probable, given his strong political opinions, that he found it difficult to ingratiate himself with local employers. Robert was active in Hastings' burgeoning socialist scene and the Social Democratic Federation, contributing leaflets, manifestoes and ideas on PR strategy. His daughter Kathleen remembered him as a good natured man, yet who was frequently demoralised by the backbiting ways and absent solidarity of his fellow tradesmen (Ball, 1979; Harker, 2003). *TRTP* draws extensively on his own work life and his encounters with employers and other workers. Noonan hoped to migrate with Kathleen to Canada and travelled to Liverpool to negotiate his passage in 1910. Sadly, he died prematurely in 1911, possibly from TB, and was buried in an unmarked 'workhouse' grave. His political engagement along with his efforts to analyse the material basis of the circumstances in which he, Kathleen and his workmates lived mark him out as a true organic intellectual.

I first read a version of *TRTP* as a teenager, and much as I would love to be able to exaggerate my 'socialist from cradle to grave' credentials, it was a sentimental rather than political encounter. Re-reading it on a Mayo bound train in 1993 a man approached me exclaiming proudly, 'that's one of the most powerful books ever written' and we had a short chat about its message and Noonan's Irishness. Like my new friend, I knew little about Robert's life and his status as 'authentic' voice of his class, but I was beginning to appreciate both the complexity and continuing relevance of his insights. Later I used the book as a teaching resource when interrogating concepts such as 'false consciousness', 'ideology' and 'oppression'. Now, as

someone who considers herself a member of that pitifully small and dysfunctional family, otherwise known as the Irish Left, I get a perverse consolation from the profound and disturbing questions that *TRTP* raises about the efficacy of socialist strategy. It lays bare our political failure, forcing us to confront the question ‘what the hell are we doing wrong?’ Why is it that despite having a compelling analysis and people’s best interests at heart, the Left seems bereft of imagination and allure (Duncombe, 2007; Reed, 2000)? Or more crudely, why in 2009, when the Irish economic miracle has ‘melted into air’ and when the insanity of financial speculation has been exposed, are the Dublin and Cork Mayday marches still so marginal? Populist commentators breathlessly assure us that Ireland is ready for an alternative; tragically that alternative appears to be Fine Gael.

If I am bemused and disillusioned, *TRTP* reminds me that such feelings are a kind of inevitable socialist dividend. The book’s central character, Owen, lurches between conviction and despair, between pity and contempt, as he struggles to convert his co-workers to socialism. It is difficult not to empathise especially if you have ever been involved in campaigning in Ireland or even if you have just expressed a contrarian viewpoint to sceptical friends and colleagues. For me the electorate’s ringing endorsement of the 2004 Citizenship Referendum was a particularly bruising encounter with democracy. Nor do the Left’s tendencies towards bickering and sectarian partyism - evident for example in wrangling about the character of the anti-war campaign - help to instil a strong sense of efficacy and relevance. But because *TRTP* presents such a powerful deconstruction of alienation and its consequences, it implicitly urges us to take matters of political strategy more seriously so that we search for some path through the impasse.

A working class novel in itself and for itself

Tressell (2004: 2) claimed that his ‘main object was to write a readable story full of human interest and based on the happenings of everyday life, the subject of Socialism being treated incidentally’. Centred on the worsening financial circumstances and growing despair of Frank Owen and his family, *TRTP* is a richly populated text that provides fascinating ethnographic insights into family, community and political life in Edwardian Hastings. Shifting between humour, fury, sentimentality and gloom it profiles a diverse cast of working class characters; sweet natured drinker Joe Philpot, loyal young apprentice Bert White, the oleaginous Christian, Slyme and ill-fated young married couple, the Eastons. Because this is a missive from and about the ‘class war’ (Sillitoe, 1991), Tressell also dissects the conduct and motives of the

worst specimens of the managerial, employing and political classes. Some of those characterisations are drawn from Noonan's time in South Africa and England – aspects of Owen's biography mirror his own (Ball, 1979, Harker, 2003) – while others are deliberate caricatures, drawn to satirise the self-delusions, pretensions and hypocrisy of social elites. Contemporary readers might be turned off by Tressell's tendency to lay it on with a trowel, particularly when he details the immorality of Mugsborough's bourgeoisie. Apparently it was constituted by a collection of overfed sociopaths whose very names evoked their avarice and contempt for humanity, Sweater, Starvem, Didlum, Grinder and Sir Graball D'Encloسلاند. Clearly, there are tensions between Tressell's responsibilities as an 'artist' or 'novelist' and as a 'socialist intellectual'. Nuance is sacrificed in the name of political commitment (Miles, 1984; Nazareth, 1967) and the interior lives of the workers are more vividly realised than those of the privileged.

And hurrah for that! Although, I focus more on the book's political rather than its literary merits, it should be said that as a *socialist* and *working class* story *TRTP* violated 'inherited assumptions of what it was to write a novel, and to write a good competent novel' (Williams, 1983: 242)³. Its status as *Penguin Modern Classic* is attributable less to academic or literary judgements and more to its 'organic' popularity as a text that was passed from reader to reader, read collectively in workshops and performed by political theatre groups since the 1950s in Britain (Harker, 2003; Miles, 1984). It presents vivid descriptions of what people ate and drank, how they budgeted, of the atmosphere in the pub and at Sunday school, of racy dinner break conversations and of brutish, pointless toil. Much of the action takes place in a house that is being renovated by the tradesmen – *the Cave* – and we learn something about what it might have felt like to paint and scrub-down walls when hungry or frozen to the bone. Social historian Rebecca Yamin (2002) regards a passage in which the Owens anxiously calculate what Christmas gifts they can afford to buy their little son as an all too rare evocation of the status of toys and play in the lives of the poor. Brad Beaven (2005) also finds clues regarding working class leisure pursuits, the popularity of music-hall songs and works' day-trips, all of which were essential diversions from drudgery.

³ Following his death, Kathleen took possession of her father's manuscript and later showed it children's writer Jessie Pope who brought it to the attention of Thomas Franklin Grant Richards of *Richards Press*. Although impressed by the manuscript (Harker, 2003: 74), he considered it somewhat rambling and it was abridged for publication. Significant editorial changes were made to the texture, tone and content of the book, pulling its political punch somewhat. The full edition was first published in paperback by Paladin in 1991 with Alan Sillitoe's introduction (Ball, 1979; Harker, 2003).

Nowadays the parenting, recreational, eating and educational practices of working class and poor communities are regularly served up as entertainment in the cultural sphere, most obviously in the genre of reality TV. *Jamie's Ministry of Food*, *The Secret Millionaire*, *Pram Face* (sic), *The Jeremy Kyle Show* and a host of similar programmes, invite viewers to ridicule, pity, judge and feign outrage at the inferior life choices and moral laxity of the so-called underclass. In stark contrast to the freakishness of those television narratives, Tressell's descriptions are underpinned by a political and economic analysis that allows readers to contextualise and problematise individual experience. Here is a discussion the kind of mundane dilemma regularly faced by the Owens and, presumably, by Noonan and families of his class,

Frankie's stockings were all broken and beyond mending, so it was positively necessary to buy him another pair for fivepence three-farthings. These stockings were not much good – a pair at double the price could have been much cheaper, for they would have lasted three or four times longer; but they could not afford to buy the dearer kind. It was just the same with the coal: if they had been able to afford it they could have bought a ton of the same class of coal for twenty-six shillings but buying it as they did, by the hundred weight, they had to pay at the rate of thirty-three shillings and fourpence a ton. It was just the same with nearly everything else. This is how the working classes are robbed. Although their incomes are the lowest, they are compelled to buy the most expensive articles – that is the lowest-priced articles. (Tressell, 2004: 366).

Furthermore, as Raymond Williams (1983)⁴ reminds us, if working class lives were not generally considered appropriate subjects for the literary form, real life working class people also made unlikely novelists. Condemned to spend the best part of their lives at labour, writers such as Noonan needed to be extraordinarily wilful and resourceful if their creative impulses were to find expression on the published page. *TRTP* was written by a 'worker fully engaged in his own work' who, for the purpose of mere survival, 'comes home from his job, writes, goes back to his job, writes, all under pressure' (Williams, 1983: 248). Kathleen Noonan, reckoned that the book took her father five years to write, during which time he was working 'a fifty-six and a half hour week' and maintaining his membership of the Social Democratic Federation (Ball, 1979: 140).

⁴ Like Williams (1983) I prefer the book's original title '*The Ragged Aresed Philanthropists*'.

A social critique of capitalism

Noting that critiques of capitalism are as old as capitalism itself, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005b) distinguish two distinctive logics that have tended to frame oppositional discourses. *Social critique* focuses on the inequalities, poverty ‘misery, exploitation, and the selfishness of a world that stimulates individualism rather than solidarity’, while the alternative critique highlights more existential, or as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005a: 175-176) term them, *artistic* concerns. These relate to capitalism’s negation of ‘individual autonomy, singularity and authenticity’ (2005a: 176). Both forms of critique are central to the purpose and content of *TRTP*. They are articulated through the private thoughts and public arguments of Owen, and in the narrative commentary that overlays the story itself. Those critiques remain central to contemporary anti-capitalist discourses, although they are not always successfully fused into a coherent and strategically minded political position (Duncombe, 2007; Frank, 2001; Reed 2001).

As a ‘social’ critique of capitalism, *TRTP* operates at a number of different levels. Most obviously, there is the emotional sway of a text that regularly moves the reader to tears and anger. Witness the diminishing fortunes of the once proud Linden family, its members variously rewarded with the workhouse, servitude and death. Bert White, based on a young friend and protégé of Noonan, is trapped in a pointless and exploitative apprenticeship where he learns little and is valued less. But viable critique needs to move beyond emotion if it is to have any long-term political impact. It requires a ‘theoretical fulcrum and an argumentative rhetoric to give voice to individual suffering and translate it into terms that refer to the common good’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005b: 36). Tressell doesn’t just want readers to sympathise with his characters, as Dickens was wont to do - indeed, most of the time his tone is sarcastic, impatient or goading. In the place of pity he offers the intellectual resources of anti-capitalism. Invoking an odd and deliberately jarring pedagogical device, reminiscent of Brecht’s didactic method, the characters of Owen and later Barrington are quite literally given the floor to explain Marx’s labour theory of value. In the chapters ‘The Oblong’ and ‘The Great Oration’ we learn that because workers are forced to sell their labour in the marketplace they are simultaneously robbed of their sense of entitlement to and ability to access the fruits of their own production (Williams, 1983).

In return for their work they are given – Money, and the things they have made become the property of the people who do nothing. Then, as the money is of no use, the workers go to shops and give it away in exchange for some of the things

they themselves have made. They spend – or give back – *All* their wages; but as the money they got as wages is not equal in value to the things they have produced they find that they are only able to buy back a *very small part*. So you see these little discs of metal – this Money – is a device for enabling those who do not work to rob the workers of the greater part of the fruits of their toil. (Tressell, 2004: 341-342 emphasis in original)

This is the fundamental injustice of capitalism; profit legitimises grand scale theft from those who contribute most to society, reducing them to a perpetual state of misery and want. Through his alter-ego Owen, Tressell opposes those who genuinely contribute to wealth creation in society with those who merely monopolise or consume it. In one memorable and counter-intuitive stroke he dismisses ‘Tramps, Beggars, Society People, the ‘Aristocracy’, Great Landowners, All those possessed of hereditary Wealth’ as a common class of parasites undertaking nothing in the way of ‘useful work’ (2004: 330). Another category includes those whose work ‘benefits themselves and harms other people. Employers – or rather Exploiters of Labour; Thieves, Swindlers, Pickpockets; profit seeking shareholder; burglars; Bishops; Financiers; Capitalists and those persons humorously called “Ministers” of religion.’ (2004: 331). Tressell thus upends the hierarchy of status and legitimacy that is normalised by capitalism, specifically as it applies in the town of Mugsborough, but more generally as it applies in our ‘meritocratic’ era. Interestingly one of the most dishonest yet convincing rhetorical tricks played by neo-liberalism’s current apologists, one practised by Republicans in the 2008 US presidential elections, is to cast as ‘elitists’ those who argue for tighter regulation of business, higher taxes or universal welfare provision. What Frank (2001: 10) calls ‘market populism’ equates democracy with share holding, social security nets with serfdom and allows Warren Buffett and Bill Gates to pass as ‘little guys’. Tressell reminds us that the primacy of capitalism rests in part upon such inversions of reality and the social critique must deal with ideology in a clear headed way so that activists begin to posit alternatives to the accepted hierarchies of our times.

Even if new readers are emotionally stirred by *TRTP*’s descriptions of absolute poverty, they might find its detours into Marxist theory somewhat removed from their own experiences of personal enrichment and consumption in a (now formerly) booming economy. However, rather than concentrate on the disparity between the earnings of skilled manual workers in the early 1900s and those of ‘knowledge-workers’ in 21st Century Ireland, consider instead the

continuity of worker 'vulnerability', a key theme pursued by Tressell and one with particular relevance to these risky economic times. Kirby (2006: 636-640) argues that capitalist globalisation has generated new threats to human and social well-being, while simultaneously eroding our 'coping mechanisms'. Volatile financial systems, insecure employment, credit enslavement, environmental hazards, social atomisation, withdrawal of the welfare net (Kirby, 2006) and other characteristics of our neo-liberal present not only condemn individuals to life on the perpetual brink, but also mean that if and when their fortunes decline they are less able to obviate the consequences. Concepts of globalisation or neo-liberalism were not common currency in Tressell's day, but his workers were ever cognisant of the precariousness of their 'situations' and the constant threat of being laid off:

terror of the impending slaughter pervaded the house. Even those who were confident of being spared and kept on till the job was finished shared the general depression, not only out of sympathy for the doomed, but because they knew that a similar fate awaited themselves (2004: 263).

Having catalogued the shaky home and work circumstances of the 'Philanthropists', their constant and often counter-productive struggles to make and stretch their pathetic incomes, Tressell makes few concessions in terms of a happy ending. There are some glimmers of hope. Owen helps reconcile Easton and his wife Ruth; their marriage sabotaged by a combination of shared poverty, Easton's boozing and the lecherous presence of their lodger Slyme. Owen confronts the employer Rushton about his scandalous treatment of young Bert White; 'I give you fair warning – I know – enough - about you - to put you – where you deserve to be – if you don't treat him better – I'll have you punished – I'll show you up' (2004: 710, pauses signifying Owen's rage and ongoing battle with TB). Barrington, who comes from a prosperous family, makes a financial gift to Owen that could lift his family temporarily out of financial ruin. But these ephemeral moments of possibility actually serve to underline the working class's more general enslavement to material relations. Worst of all is their vulnerability to needless and otherwise avoidable death, whether in the form of 'industrial accidents' of the kind that befalls Joe Philpot, or the Tuberculosis that is certain to kill Owen or 'that most unnatural act of all, suicide' (Hunt, 2004: xiii).

An artistic critique

Tristram Hunt (2004: xviii) notes that Tressell was influenced by competing 'traditions within the socialist canon' and integrated 'both ethical and economic schools of thought'. He

recognises the puritanism that fuels the book's regular attacks on the cultural lives and entertainments of the workers; their fondness for the pub, sporting events, music hall songs and newspapers like the *Daily Chloroform*. Here Tressell anticipate critiques of commodified mass culture, such as those by Horkheimer and Adorno (1973) that would emphasise cultural consumption's role in dulling the political sensibilities of the working class, accommodating them to the discipline of capitalist production and eroding their capacities for critical thinking. Unfortunately, as an intellectual Owen is a regular source of bemusement to his work-mates, marked out as different not only for the nature and fervour of his political conviction but also for his atheism, precise use of grammar, his gravitas and tee-total ways (see Hunt, 2004). Problematically for those of us less ascetic in our habits, Owen's restraint and rational arguments contrast too sharply with the workers' hedonism and emotional understandings. He cannot or will not appeal to their dreams, fantasies or hunger for escapism. With this juxtaposition of opposites Tressell exposes an important dimension of the Left's continued estrangement from the broader population; the lapses in empathy that make socialists condescend to those around us, proscribing behaviour, invoking taboos and ridiculing or demonising 'popular desire' (Duncombe, 2007a: 37). All of this is of course symptomatic of Owen's/our more general failure to establish real lines of communication with putative 'comrades'.

But Owen is not just the archetypal socialist kill-joy. If he is frustrated by the degraded cultural and productive lives of his colleagues, unlike them he actually believes that the working class should have more of the finer things in life and he clings to a romantic vision of work as personally fulfilling, socially useful and aesthetically rewarding. Tressell echoes the philosophical concerns of Victorian socialist, poet and artist, William Morris (Hunt, 2004) and his understanding of work's purpose:

It is threefold, I think – hope of rest, hope of product, hope of pleasure in the work itself; and hope of these also in some abundance of good quality; rest enough and good enough to be worth having; product worth having by one who is neither a fool nor an ascetic; pleasure enough for all of us to be conscious of it while we are at work (Morris, 1934: 604).

Morris (1934) envisaged a world of work that nurtures both the mind and the soul, one that can validate skill and release imagination. Likewise, Tressell believes that workers when encouraged to experiment or practise creativity can pre-figure the experience of personal liberation by making and doing. Owen secures a commission to decorate a room according to

his own artistic vision, a job that preoccupies and excites him. He researches 'Moorish design', meticulously plans every detail of his project and, gallingly for his boss, demands decent materials. As Owen loses himself in these tasks he becomes detached from the ongoing misery of his situation and experiences a genuine harmony with his labour, all the more precious because it is so rare and unexpected.

Acutely conscious of the real-world disjuncture between time spent at production and consumption, how those who sacrifice most to the former do least of the latter, Morris (1934) and Tressell also recognised that too much time and energy is diverted into the manufacture of cheap, sub-standard and unnecessary goods. If Tressell hoped that work might bring its own intrinsic rewards, he also understood the impossibility of such ambition under the corrupting influence of capitalism. Witness the employer Rushton and his enforcer Hunter, cutting corners on costs; employing men at lower rates, overpricing jobs, advocating the lowest grade materials and the most slapdash of methods.

According to the specification, all the outside woodwork was supposed to have three coats, and the guttering, rain-pipes and the other ironwork two coats, but Crass and Hunter had arranged to make two coats do for most of the windows and woodwork and all the ironwork was to be made do with one coat only (2004: 307).

The workers, unsurprisingly, respond with cynicism - 'none of them took any pride in their work; they did not 'love' it. They had no conception of that lofty ideal of 'work for work's sake', which is so popular with the people who do nothing' (101) - and consequently the workplace culture is characterised by insincerity and alienation.

Paolo Freire (1972; 32) observed that as 'oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves also become dehumanized'. The reader is embarrassed by Hunter's surveillance of the workers and his misplaced loyalty to his employers. His obsessive desire to 'catch out' the others drives him to ludicrous extremes and he creeps up ladders, struggles through windows and tiptoes about to spy undetected. A mere employee he identifies upwards in the hierarchy not downwards: therefore he is hated by the workers and patronized by the bosses. In one scene where Rushton and Sweater, owner of the *Cave*, survey the renovations, Hunter or Nimrod as he is nicknamed, waits eagerly to do their bidding. When finally called by Rushton, 'Nimrod ran to him like a dog taken notice of by his master: if he had possessed a tail, it is probable that he would have wagged it' (Tressell, 2004; 126). While this is a comical

image, there is cold comfort in the realisation that the other workers would have behaved similarly if roles were reversed. In the face of arbitrary sackings and a general culture of fear, employees do the needful to curry favour with Hunter or anyone else with leverage. Crass a man devoid of charm and talent who has secured the role of foreman, dedicates his working week to ‘cringing, fawning, abject servility’ (351). Appreciating the marginal power that this affords him, the others ply Crass with alcohol they cannot afford and publicly defer to his opinions while privately detesting him

Will 21st Century employees be surprised to learn that work-places destroy initiative, reward arse-licking and perpetuate rivalry? Possibly not, but because those tendencies now get dressed up in the language of Human Relations, it is often difficult to trace the power dynamics involved. In the years since publication of *TRTP* capitalism has learned to embrace some of the elements of the ‘artistic critique’. One of neo-liberalism’s ideological innovations (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Frank, 2001; Klein, 2000) has been to colonise the countercultural tropes of freedom, creativity and dynamism. As the ‘public sector’ becomes semantically associated with torpor and bureaucracy, the free-wheeling skateboarding CEO epitomises the vibrancy of private enterprise. We occupy a time intellectually and politically when rigid and polarised thinking is widely distrusted, especially when it comes to matters of social class. Theoretically, social scientists are indebted to analyses of power that highlight its diffusion rather than its monopolisation and we imagine that in many work-places, maybe even our own, there is scope for communication and negotiation across the employer/employee axis. We hear, for example, that at Google, the ‘laid-back ambience is credited as a key part of its success. Free perks for staff include three healthy meals a day, massages and laundry services as well as an on-site gym and swimming pool.’ (Smith, 2008)

Superficially, we experience a more humane version of capitalism, one that treats workers like people too. But as Jacques Donzelot (1991: 251) correctly observes, ‘[F]lexible hours, job enrichment, self-managed work teams, continued retraining’, cannot be ‘regarded as serious efforts to modify the capitalist regime’. After all, the Irish Small Firm’s association can square its demand for a reduction in the already paltry minimum wage (SFA; July, 15th 2008) with its promotion of ‘Work-Life Balance’ (www.sfa.ie). Detached from its social conscience, the artistic critique can and is being adapted in service of capitalism’s bottom line, the profit-motive. Workplaces are being humanised in order to minimise resistance and mobilize workers towards fuller participation in the dominant ‘logic of production’ (Donzelot, 1991:

279). Although he could never have anticipated the form and content of these new management approaches, Tressell would have seen through the artifice. He understood that alienation encompasses *both* artistic and social dimensions; that a ‘work-life balance’ is impossible when worker vulnerability and material inequality grow ever more pronounced.

Acquiescence, consent and sporadic resistance

That capitalism is founded upon and is sustained by violence, has been a significant theme in theoretical and popularising analyses of neo-liberalism over the last decade (Klein, 2007; Negri, 1999). Naomi Klein (2007) has highlighted the shock tactics and ‘therapies’ practised in Chile, South Africa, and post-Katrina New Orleans; where ideologues, opportunistic corporations and political elites have actively cultivated and exploited instances of war, terror and social disintegration in order to establish the primacy of the market. Antonio Negri (1999), borrowing from Marx, maintains that violence has been a ‘constant’ in capitalism, although its form and substance have changed over time. Earlier processes of accumulation were supported by the overt brutality of theft, enclosure, slavery and imperial conquest, but as the capitalist system developed, the ‘silent coercion of economic relations’ became fundamental to its survival and identity (Negri, 1999: 250-267).

Tressell evokes both the silent and more vulgar forms of coercion as he describes the symbiotic relationship between violence and capitalism in *TRTP*. As the tradesmen renovate the Cave, their workdays are punctuated by episodes of bullying, summary dismissal and Hunter’s creeping surveillance.

‘Get the work done! Or if you don’t want to I’ll very soon find someone who does! I’ve been noticing your style of doing things for some time past and I want you to understand that you can’t play the fool with me. There’s plenty of better men than you walking about’(2004: 35).

It is a ‘reign of terror – the terror of the sack’ (2004: 493). Even the most intimate personal relationships are contaminated by ‘jealousy and ill-feeling’ (2004: 404) as the workers vie for petty privileges or the simple honour of being kept on. Their family lives also suffer. Although obviously underpaid Easton turns his resentments on his wife, blaming her for their financial hardship; ‘It seems to me,... that you don’t manage things as well as you might’ (2004: 52). The childhoods of Mugsborough’s youngsters are devastated by poverty and want, what Owen regards as another kind of violence, and he despairs that parents are ‘willing and content that their children should be made into beasts of burden for the benefit of other people’ (2004: 280).

Claims of ‘coercion’ or ‘force’ do not fully explain why so many workers then and now are impervious to solidarity and socialist argument. Undeniably violence of the kind described above is a disincentive to collective organisation, but Tressell, like Gramsci, also recognised the deeper problem of consent. Mugsborough is a ‘perfect’ example of Hegemony, a place ‘where dominated groups are unable to distinguish between their own interests and attitudes and those of dominant groups’ (Van Dijk, 1998: 102). The workers believe themselves to have informed political opinions – affecting Tory or Liberal allegiances – and demand that those viewpoints be respected by the ever contemptuous Owen. Paradoxically, they seem equally convinced that they cannot or should not leave any discernible mark on the world around them. They regularly interrupt debates about politics – farting, wisecracking or digressing - and proudly claim disinterest in life’s bigger philosophical questions. This culture of self-satisfaction, ignorance and apathy is reinforced by Mugsborough’s ‘ideological state apparatus’; its Sunday schools, churches, politicians and popular entertainments. In some of its most powerful paragraphs, *TRTP* explains how those institutions distort and obscure social reality and further infantilise an all too receptive working class. ‘From their infancy they had been trained to distrust their own intelligence, and to leave the management of the affairs of the world – and for that matter the next world too – to their betters’ (2004: 247). In the place of social policy there is the Organised Benevolence Society, providing charity that ‘humiliated, degraded and pauperized’ its victims ‘and prevented the problem being dealt with in a sane and practical manner’ (2004: 428).

Despite living with and managing poverty on a daily basis the workers present the most facile explanations of its causes:

‘The greatest cause of poverty is hover-population’ remarked Harlow.

‘Drink is the cause of most of the poverty’ said Slyme.

‘Yes’ said Crass agreeing with Slyme, ‘an thers plenty of ‘em wot’s too lazy to work when they can get it’ (2004: 17)

This from men who were acutely aware of how few decent opportunities existed locally and lived in constant dread of being laid off! Much of their chatter fixates on the inevitability of things as they are and demonstrates their resignation towards their fate, while also recording a disturbing lack of empathy towards each other. They distance themselves from the shame of their own unacknowledged poverty by demonising and scapegoating anyone lower down the pecking order, whether women, foreigners or the unemployed.

TRTP is torn between what James Scott (1990) calls ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ theories of ideology. The former refers to a highly deterministic analysis of capitalism as the *Great System* that structures and routinises the attitudes and behaviours of all social classes; ‘the present system compels selfishness. One must either trample upon others or be trampled upon oneself’ (Tressell, 2004: 246). The ‘thin theory’ is based on the (marginally) more actor oriented assumption that workers pragmatically resign themselves to the impossibility of change:

I begin to think that a great deal of what Owen says is true. But for my part I can’t see ‘ow it’s ever goin to be altered, can you?

Blowed if I know mate. But whether it can be altered or not, there’s one thing very certain, it won’t be done in *our* time’ (2004: 264).

Admittedly, in this day and age it is a barbed compliment to describe a book as offering great insights into the workings of ideology. Neo-liberalism assumes that we are rational actors propelled onward by our self-interest; sussed and savvy consumers empowered by our autonomous market choices. To speak about false consciousness is a kind of heresy and even among socialists it is difficult to sustain the argument that the masses are duped by the seamless operation of ideology. It is an insult to democracy or cultural pluralism, leaves us open to the inevitable charge of elitism and raises uncomfortable questions about the possibility and desirability of popular activism. When Tressell presents the workers as deluded foils to Owen’s intellectualism it is a risky strategy for anyone seeking political allies and one I find difficult to endorse. Optimistically perhaps, I choose to believe that something more interesting might be going on in the text. Although the book draws on real acquaintances of Noonan, it is less a commentary on the health of their consciousness than it is an attempt to activate the consciousness of the readership. As Roland Barthes (1993ed: 40)⁵ has observed, ‘[T]o see someone who does not see is the best way to be intensely aware of *what* he does not see’. If the workers cannot see through capitalism’s mystifications, Owen cannot see the limitations of his own style of communication. By revealing this disconnect between Owen’s theory and the workers’ ideology, Tressell calls on *us* to fill the intellectual space between; so that we name and clarify our political analysis, recognise the challenges implicit in collective organisation and begin to construct convincing counter-hegemonic arguments.

Even when subordinates appear to acquiesce in the face of domination, their behaviour ‘offstage’ in privatised or sequestered social spaces may suggest critical attitudes that are otherwise imperceptible from their formal encounters with elites (Scott, 1990). Although, Tressell is deeply frustrated by the workers’ collusion with oppression, it is not the only story he tells us about their political awareness. He records various acts of subversion and resistance, what Scott (1990) calls ‘hidden transcripts’, all reflecting an underlying sense of grievance and dispossession. These transcripts include disparaging nicknames, ‘Nimrod’, ‘Misery’ or ‘Pontius Pilate’ for their overlord, Hunter. Instances of theft are framed as acts of vengeance. When Joe Philpot steals turpentine to rub into his aching legs and shoulders, he mutters ‘[T]his is where we gets some of our own back’ (2004: 351). Even pious young Slyme, repeating the sentiment ‘we must get our own back somehow’ (2004: 250), engages in industrial sabotage, destroying perfectly good wallpaper so he can feign greater productivity. Furtive cigarettes, Joe Philpot’s illicit excursions to buy beer for his mates and their occasional outbursts into song, all suggest the workers appreciate the awfulness of their conditions and they try to claw back dignity and autonomy whenever they can.

Robin Kelley’s (1996) *Race Rebels* traces the hidden history of Black working class resistance in the USA. Much of this resistance was/is expressed outside formal political channels; rarely claiming an *a priori* philosophical vision or status, more typically focused on issues of ‘identity, dignity and fun’ (Kelley, 1996; 3) in work, cultural or public spaces. Kelley also foresees the dangers in romanticising this conduct, whether by overstating its political impact or assuming it is a substitute for organisation (Duncombe 2007b; Reed, 2000). Although he does not invoke the now fashionable discourse of resistance, Tressell recognises its limitations and ostensibly treats such survival strategies as expressions of ‘apolitical’ as opposed to ‘political’ consciousness. Interestingly, Joe Philpot who is perhaps the greatest workplace resister of them all is also one of Owen’s few converts to Socialism. It is a pity then that *TRTP* does not go further with this theme, that it does not explore if and how Owen and Barrington might have built upon the sublimated anger of their colleagues in order to win lasting concessions from the bosses. But again this is not just Tressell’s failure, it is ours. The Irish Left still finds it difficult to harness those sporadic outbursts of dissent – rejected EU referenda or complaints to Liveline – that suggest that capitalism’s ideological supremacy is less secure than we would otherwise imagine.

The legacy, a how ‘not to’ of socialism?

At the risk of alienating prospective readers, particularly those already committed to the Left, I admit that *TRTP* is a deeply ambivalent appraisal of socialist consciousness and its ability to thrive when and where it is most needed. Tressell suggests that even when such consciousness does emerge it is easily corrupted by hopelessness – Frank Owen’s despairing lurches into suicidal fantasy - and cynicism – the Renegade Socialist who believes that people ‘are being beaten with whips of their own choosing’ (2004: 721). When a motley crew of activists finally mobilises in Mugsborough they are attacked by a mob. Unsurprisingly, Tressell’s pessimism is much criticised by socialist writers. Dave Harker (2003) correctly problematises the mismatch between *TRTP*’s obvious engagement with theory and critique and its limited acknowledgment of really existing socialist organisations. References to the labour movement are oblique and Tressell never really considers what role unions might play in confronting ritualised exploitation in the *Cave*. Noonan’s biographer, FC Ball (1979; 120), observes how Owen stumbled over his ‘arguments upon fundamentals, which the men neither understood nor related to their own experience’ when he might have fared better if he had identified a practical issue around which they could coalesce. James D Young (1980: 292) is more scathing still, finding Tressell guilty of a kind of revolutionary bad faith;

Robert Tressell’s explicit rejection of the classical Marxist argument that the emancipation of the working class could only be accomplished by the working class themselves permeates his socialist concepts and colours his portrayal of the English working class. Though he was critical of ‘thieves, swindlers, pickpockets, burglars, financiers bishops and ministers of religion’, he reserved his most bitter criticism for the ‘real enemy’ – the English working class.

However, I think that one of the greatest achievements of *TRTP* is to evoke the frustration that is engendered when socialist consciousness is abstracted from the practical politics of doing. Owen uses his lunch-breaks to lecture the others on theory, but does not speak directly to the indignities they suffer on a daily basis. Tressell knows that Owen fails to make socialism relevant, but *TRTP* cannot (or will not) provide the blue-print for a better society. Instead he uses Owen to explore the personal isolation that many activists experience when they find themselves out of step with the general mood - the loneliness of the long distance socialist. Isolation is exacerbated by a recurring contradiction; socialism privileges the working class as revolutionary subjects, yet socialists are often unable to establish real lines of communication with that broader constituency. Most obviously, *TRTP* explores how a combination of ideological forces and ritual humiliations fracture and erode worker solidarity. More subtle,

however, is its reminder that political conviction and theoretical clarity offer little protection against the disappointment of not making an impact.

If *TRTP* exposes the Left's problem with relevance it also suggests that we suffer a deficit of imagination. In the course of the novel, Tressell keeps a certain analytical distance from Owen, often extending, sometimes challenging the conclusions drawn by his lead character. Noonan's daughter Kathleen believed that Noonan saw himself as a composite of the temperaments of Owen and Barrington, the latter a high-born slightly shadowy figure who does not need to labour but chooses to do so in order to understand the lives of the workers (Harker, 2003; 68). While Owen debates the issues of the day with his colleagues, scorning their judgmentalism, their nationalism and their rudimentary take on economics, he, like so many of us, is unable to explain what form really existing socialism might take. At best and somewhat unconvincingly he can only suggest what socialism is not. Like his colleagues he too is ultimately tied to a vision of things as they are.

Barrington, probably dredging his personal history of advantage, is better able to imagine and explain what a socialist society might actually entail. The chapter 'The Great Oration' is a rare opportunity for him to take the workplace lectern and flesh out that vision;

PUBLIC OWNERSHIP and cultivation of the land, the PUBLIC OWNERSHIP of the mines, railways, canals, ships. Factories and all the other means of production, and the establishment of an Industrial Civil Service – a National Army of Industry – for the purpose of producing the necessities, comforts and refinements of life in that abundance which has been made possible by science and machinery – for the use and benefit of the *whole of the people*. (2004: 598 emphasis in original)

Towards its end *TRTP* shifts focus slightly from Owen to Barrington, perhaps implying that the latter is better resourced to sustain his socialist convictions into the long-term. Predictably, some writers attribute this to Tressell's innate conservatism, his implicit advocacy of 'socialism-from-above' (Young, 1985; 296) and his belief that real-life workers, including Owen, will never make it without bourgeois paternalism and direction. I think that Young's commentary lacks generosity and is too fixated upon the wearying factionalism of the Left

where tendency battles counter tendency to ‘authenticate’ and own the movement⁶. *TRTP*’s message is more nuanced and more honourable. Tressell recognises that for all who participate in struggle, our greatest strengths may be our greatest weaknesses. The workers are practical and attuned to the obstacles in their lives, but are too wedded to the here and now to embrace new possibilities. Owen’s analysis of his class position is acute but it distances him from his workmates and denies him vital forms of community and personal solidarity. Barrington’s privilege protects him from deprivation and reprisal but he will never truly know the daily grind of oppression. Together all of these characters bring something valuable and useful to the Left, but separately their vision is partial and their reach is limited.

TRTP is not necessarily the best book written about socialism, but it is one of the most insightful stories ever written about the Left. As a ‘problem posing’ text in the Freirean sense, it avoids easy solutions and alerts us to the tensions that beset activism. It does not and cannot resolve the Left’s problem with broader political strategy or our failure to connect with the majority of people’s hopes and dreams but it recognises the costs associated with that failure. Perhaps that doesn’t sound like much of an achievement but I think we need constant reminding of how and why it is important. And as long as we indulge ourselves with sectarianism and recrimination, Tressell’s work will sound a righteous note of disapproval.

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