# Uncivil Society: Margaret Harkness, Engels and the Lumpenproletariat

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**Abstract**

Taking Engels's famous 1888 letter to Margaret Harkness as its starting point, this article explores the vicissitudes of the concept of the lumpenproletariat for late-nineteenth-century social and literary history. I argue that Harkness's overlooked work complicates both received accounts of the London 'residuum' and the possibilities of typicality for Marxist literary theory. Reading her novels of the late 1880s in conjunction with Marx and Engels's polemics against the lumpenproletariat, I argue that Harkness's socialist-feminist authorship simultaneously registers and amends Engels's famous concept through her depiction of female labour and male indolence in the precarious informal economy of London's East End in the 1880s. Most crucially, Engels's recommendation of Balzac's 'men of the future' is reworked in her corpus as the necessary adequation of a feminised labour force to the demands of a precarious economy reliant on just-in-time production. Harkness's novels open up a more elastic conception of the proleptic possibilities of the typical character, for such exigencies of a mobile labour force are themselves signature oppressions of post-Fordist economies.

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Engels's 1888 letter to Margaret Harkness urging the realistic method of Balzac is one of the most widely anthologised documents of Marxist literary theory. Resurfacing in the 1930s, the letter became talismanic both for theories of socialist realism and for Georg Lukács's insistence on realist typicality over naturalist observation or modernist fragmentation. Initially applauded by orthodox Communists but today more often pilloried for its aesthetic conservatism, this short text is always lurking more or less consciously in the Marxist critical tradition. The caveat that follows Engels's much-cited prescription of Balzacian realism is, however, less often discussed. Having chastised Harkness for her despairing portrayal of a hapless working-class woman in *A City Girl* (1887), Engels qualifies this criticism: 'I must own in your defence, that nowhere in the civilized world are the working people less actively resistant, more passively submitting to fate, more *hébétés* [dazed, bewildered, depressed] than in the East End of London.'[1] Here Engels firmly

excludes the London poor from the committed proletariat – no mere prejudice but a constitutive exclusion. For as Gareth Stedman-Jones has documented, there was only a tiny factory proletariat in London. The development of heavy industry took place in the north and midlands, while the wealthy capital remained in a chronically underdeveloped state. London's workers were sharply bifurcated between artisans and casualised labourers, and were therefore necessarily unassimilable to conceptions of revolutionary action predicated on proletarian consciousness.[2]

And yet, as several of Harkness's novels of the period document, the so-called 'residuum' became particularly salient during the mid-to-late 1880s, as a series of political events brought the London casual labourer to the fore in socialist politics. These years saw a dramatic swing in perceptions of the 'casual'. As depicted in Harkness's 1905 novel *George Eastmont, Wanderer*, the rioting of unemployed labourers in February 1886 was an infamous moment in the failure of the Social Democratic Federation's attempts to organise London's workers. Casualised workers were blamed for the collapse of socialist unity, as their lack of self-control allegedly dragged down the higher class consciousness of the artisans and proletarians. In a characteristic passage, Engels described the unemployed rioters as representing 'the borderline between working class and lumpenproletariat', with 'a sufficient admixture of roughs and 'Arrays to leaven the whole into a mass ready for any "lark" up to a wild riot'.[3] With the success of the 1889 Dockers' Strike, however, Engels and others very quickly shifted positions. Now the lowest strata of the working class had shown their ability for organised protest, Engels was exhilarated, and in a famous letter to the *Labour Elector*, he claimed that 'if the dockers get organized, all other sections will follow'.[4] The dockers were now cast in an almost vanguardist role, but in Engels's conditional clause the old condemnation still lingers, especially when read alongside a contemporaneous letter to Bernstein in which he exclaims 'if *this* stratum can be organized, that is a fact of great import!'[5] There's a cruel irony at work here, for the vacillations of the casually employed are matched by Engels's equally abrupt about turn – another indication that the casual labourer is seen as mere flotsam and jetsam in more ways than one. How, then, to organise the London poor?

Margaret Harkness's career provides a particularly salient vantage point from which to re-examine this problematic.[6] More than a mere footnote to Engels's famous pronouncements, Harkness was an important figure in British socialist politics of the 1880s. Moving to London in 1877 to work as a nurse, she soon switched from nursing to journalism. She quickly established herself as a socialist activist and novelist and became acquainted with a wide cast of late-nineteenth-century socialists including Eleanor Marx, Olive Schreiner and Henry Hyde Champion, introducing her cousin Beatrice Potter (later Webb)

to many of these figures for the first time. Working closely with Champion, Harkness provided support for Keir Hardie's campaign for election in 1888, and for the London Dock Strike in 1889. She became involved with the SDF, but parted ways shortly afterwards, complaining of sectarian in-fighting and impractical theorising; this perhaps signalled, like Champion's departure, a distaste for the revolutionary position briefly held by the SDF at the time. In addition to a body of journalism chronicling casualised labour, she very quickly produced four slum novels under the pen name John Law: *A City Girl* (1887), *Out of Work* (1888) and *In Darkest London* (1889), all set in London's East End, and *A Manchester Shirtmaker* (1890). Moving away from socialism and beginning to display a distinct strain of anti-Semitism, in the early 1890s she turned her attention exclusively to charity work, writing an article in praise of the Salvation Army's General Booth, and even voicing some support for social imperialist plans of forced resettlement in her later novel, *George Eastmont, Wanderer.*[7]

Veering between sympathetic identification, reformist zeal and a strained sense of possible revolutionary potential, Harkness's novels closely chart attempts to represent the London poor, in particular the group she called the 'class below the unskilled labourers: I mean the scum of our population that haunts the slums of our great cities'.[8] This statement encapsulates Harkness's ambivalence towards the surplus population – what does it mean to feel sympathy for 'scum'? The broader importance of this term becomes yet more apparent when we consider the 1888 Moore-Engels translation of *The Communist Manifesto*, which renders the infamous category of the lumpenproletariat as 'the dangerous classes, social scum'; and it seems no coincidence that Harkness's short novel of the following year, *In Darkest London* was to use 'scum' fourteen times. This is not to say that Harkness suddenly discovered a disgust for the disorganised lumpen masses upon reading Marx and Engels, but rather that her works highlight some surprising articulations of the surplus population within socialist theory and praxis.

This essay will argue that Harkness's authorship not only registered the shifts in socialist perceptions of the London residuum, but also complicates our understanding of the vexed question of the lumpenproletariat and its relation to literary history. Engels rarely used the term in his writings in English, nor does the 1888 Moore-Engels translation of the *Collected Works*, and consequently scholarship on the lumpenproletariat hardly mentions Britain. Yet the ragged spectre stalking London can surely be named lumpen. Violently criminal, festering and scabby, East End 'roughs' and their unpredictable mass muscle bear more than a passing resemblance to the most famous depictions of the lumpenproletariat: 'that passive dungheap of the lowest levels of the old society, is flung into action here and there by the proletarian revolution, through by its

whole situation in life it will be readier to sell itself to reactionary intrigues' – whether 'scum', 'dangerous class' or 'lumpenproletariat' as the various versions of the term have it, here is a definite yet heterogeneous menace to the proletarian revolution.[9] Unsurprisingly, Engels and others saw this 'passive mass' as worthless human material for the committed realist novelist, poor copy compared to the awakening proletariat or, for a previous generation, the rising bourgeoisie. Simultaneously echoing and amending the social typology of the lumpenproletariat in a naturalist literary mode, Harkness's persistent attention to the 'scum' of London thus raises the question of the elasticity of Engels's concept of realism, particularly the ability of differing narrative techniques to predict future political developments through the presentation of typical characters.

In what follows I first briefly outline Marx and Engels's concept of the lumpenproletariat, paying particular attention to pressure the concept puts on the troubled relationship between revolutionary agency and economic determinism, and to the ramifications of this pressure for Marxist theories of literary realism. Next, this essay turns to Harkness's first two London novels, focusing on their presentation of the relationship between gender and agency. For Harkness's early novels, the difficulty of separating the scum from the worker is expressed through the question of female labour within the context of mass unemployment, as she counterposes the 'strong minded proletarian spinster' to the worthless male 'loafer'. This important socialist-feminist intervention in the cultural history of the lumpenproletariat must however be qualified by examining the ways in which her split between male indolence and female industry upholds a moralistic insistence on the value of work. I next explore this problematic through a reading of *In Darkest London*, arguing that, under the pressure of the language of the parasite, Harkness is unable to maintain any viable sense of revolutionary or reformist commitment, and her socialism dissolves into racist moralising. In conclusion I then briefly consider how Harkness's depiction of female industry might illuminate aspects of the contemporary neoliberal casualisation and feminisation of labour; in turn, I contend that Harkness's naturalism operates much closer in line with the predictive power of the realist novel celebrated by Engels than might it have seemed at the time.

## Locating the Lumpenproletariat

Marx and Engels first coin the term in 1845 to describe the Roman proles at the time of the fall of the Empire: 'Located between the free men and the slaves, the plebeians never raised themselves above the level of a *Lumpenproletariat*, a sub-proletariat. In general, Rome never exceeded the limits of the city.'[10] In

this observation from *The German Ideology*, the plebeian is characterised by an intermediate degree of agency – neither slaves nor entirely free, they are also tightly constrained within the boundaries of the city, a distinctly urban mass. Marx and Engels go on to assert that the fall of Rome was due in large part to its underdeveloped relations of production; the lumpen mob is a telling symptom of this structural failure. Elsewhere in *The German Ideology* they also make clear that the lumpenproletariat has existed in various forms 'in every epoch' and on 'a *mass scale* since the decline of the middle ages', a point further underlined by Engels in *The Peasant War in Germany* (1850).[11]

Following the failure of the 1848 revolutions, Marx and Engels mount increasingly vitriolic attacks on the lumpenproletariat, in particular the *lazzaroni* who sided with the monarchy against the bourgeoisie in Naples, and the Paris lumpenproletariat who, they claim, supported the bourgeoisie against the proletariat.[12] Marx's most famous depiction of the lumpenproletariat then appears in his 1852 polemic *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

> Alongside decayed roués with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, lazzaroni, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaus*, pimps, brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars – in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French call *la bohème*.[13]

In this curiously lyrical passage Marx underlines the incommensurability of the differing elements of the lumpenproletariat – not only, like the peasantry failing to constitute a class for themselves (as in his depiction of small-holding peasants as a 'sack of potatoes'), but not even a class in themselves. Racially diverse, by occupation widely divergent, and drawn from all levels of a decaying society, the lumpenproletariat is a mixed bag of the worst possible elements, rather than the 'simple addition of the homologous magnitudes' of the peasantry.[14] Marx's grouping of such disparate elements together within the list form also has a paradoxically homogenising force characteristic of bourgeois depictions of the 'radically "other"', as Dominick LaCapra has observed.[15]

Marx and Engels go on to deploy the term in different contexts and in differing registers, sometimes, as Peter Stallybrass notes, as a racial category to denote 'a nomadic tribe, innately depraved', at others to describe the parasitical finance aristocracy, and even as a term of abuse directed towards the staff of the bourgeois newspaper *Kölnische Zeitung* and other journalists.[16] Despite these variants, the lumpenproletariat largely denotes a criminal 'dangerous

class', choosing to live outside the relations of production, and either pathetically apolitical or bribed to carry out counterrevolutionary violence. The lumpenproletariat is a crucial term for Marx and Engels as they seek to overturn bourgeois conceptions of the proletariat as a criminal, undifferentiated mass; a necessary evil and abject remainder of the development of their theory of class struggle.[17]

The lumpenproletariat is thus positioned awkwardly aslant the dialectics of voluntarism and economic determinism. Never entirely resolved by Marx and Engels, nor by Georg Lukács's theory of the proletariat as the subject-object of history, these dialectics are famously vexed for proletarian politics, forming the most important divergence between the economism of the Second International and the Bolshevik vanguard. The question is even more fraught for the lumpenproletariat, which functions as an acute point of pressure in Marxist theorisations of agency. While Marx castigated the lumpenproletariat for a complete inability to act as a collective subject, he also stressed that the lumpen is distinguished from the rest of the surplus population in that an element of choice is involved in their location outside of the relations of production – a moralistic position that to a certain degree preserves the bourgeois division between the deserving and undeserving poor, but which also invests the lumpen with more agency than the rest of the surplus population and the reserve army of labour.[18] In a more valorising register such as Frantz Fanon's, lumpen subjects are on the one hand necessarily primed for revolution given their outcast position, yet on the other possessed of a uniquely agentive urban radicalism.[19] Nathaniel Mills has recently argued in similar vein that the lumpenproletariat is cast both 'as immiserated products of an oppressive system […] and as free agents who created new possibilities from the margins of both capitalist social formations and traditional revolutionary organizations'.[20] The lumpenproletariat might sometimes make its own history, but neither in circumstances of their own making nor – unlike the proletariat – in those immanent to their subject position within the relations of production.

The question of immanent agency has wide-ranging implications for the place of the lumpenproletariat in Marxist theories of literary realism. To take their most robust and sustained elaboration: for Lukács the historical dynamism of the realist novel stems from the narrative eloquence of the typical character, sleekly reflecting a deep totality of social and political change in their progress through the course of the novel. This necessarily requires a relation of immanence between character development and social world that in turn enables the realist novelist to predict future political developments. But if a formation is always located outside the relations of production, then these possibilities are foreclosed from the start. Lukács's polemics against the 'eccentric' character type in modernism and naturalism can be read as a

rejection of the lumpenproletarian milieus often found in these modes, closely tied up with their epistemological failure to articulate the totality of social experience and thence the shape of social forms to come.[21] The lumpen is, in other words, going nowhere.

This is generally implicit in Lukács, but becomes far more explicit in the Marxist reception of Alfred Döblin's 1929 novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Critics seized on Döblin's portrayal of a feckless lumpenproletarian drifter and petty criminal, Franz Biberkopf, who staggers around Weimar Berlin with very little self-awareness – let alone class consciousness. Instead of a properly political scene of action, Otto Biha argued that Döblin was portraying a 'fantastic underworld', a criticism echoed by other Marxist critics in Germany and beyond.[22] Yet Biberkopf might plausibly be seen as a very typical character indeed, whose drunken, abusive progress through the novel becomes acutely proleptic of the careening of Nazism across the world historical stage. What I'm suggesting here is not so much a rejection of Lukácsian theories of realism as much as a widening of the concept of typicality to include a broader range of texts depicting non-normative subjects encompassing, for instance, a major line of queer writing, as I argue elsewhere.[23] George Ciccariello-Maher's work on the *barrios*, meanwhile, amends Lukács's theory of proletarian class consciousness to suggest that Venezuelan 'lumpen-capitalism' can only be adequately apprehended and resisted by lumpen subjects; although Ciccariello-Maher is not interested in the novel, his popular history of the Venezuelan revolution raises the question of lumpen typicality in a salient fashion.[24] When workers in an informal economy overshadow the factory proletariat – as in late-nineteenth-century London perhaps as much as contemporary Venezuela – then it might be plausibly argued that here are the properly typical characters for the committed novelist. In turn, the narration of these lumpen lives may well then function proleptically for future moments of disorganised labour. As I shall now argue in more detail, Harkness's depictions of female labour and male indolence within the surplus population can be seen in precisely this way: it is her hard-pressed seamstresses and assiduously altruistic female thieves who anticipate the mounting feminisation of labour in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

## 'That Place Needs a Zola'

Harkness's first novel and the target of Engels's criticism, *A City Girl*, features a young East End seamstress and denizen of a rookery, Nelly, who is courted by a decent working-class ex-soldier, George, but seduced by a middle-class man, Mr Grant. Nelly becomes pregnant by Grant, loses her job and the baby, and finally joylessly marries an equally glum George. She is portrayed as feckless

throughout the narrative, presenting a lack of commitment that is mirrored by Grant, a Radical who disregards any working-class capacity for agency, and George, an unthinking Conservative. The only character endowed with any serious purpose is the 'little Captain', the Salvation Army's Captain Lobe, who reappears in *In Darkest London* as the protagonist. Lobe rescues Nelly from the streets and the violence of her brother, and arranges lodgings and care for her during her pregnancy and her baby's short life. Perhaps unsurprisingly, critics have generally dismissed the novel as a sentimental, paternalistic tale aimed at a middle-class readership.[25]

The novel's literary value is indeed somewhat doubtful, as Harkness struggles to integrate the narrative claims of melodrama with the paradigmatic downward spiral of naturalist fiction. However, the problem with most critical accounts of *A City Girl* is that they lean too heavily on a lack of explicit statements of commitment and moments of activism, when the obvious starting point for a materialist inquiry would be the forms of labour represented in Harkness's text, curiously overlooked by most critics. The cast of the novel is clearly devoid of class consciousness, but Harkness also draws a sharp distinction between Nelly's labour and her brother's idleness. Even when heavily pregnant, Nelly attempts to continue work but is turned away. By contrast, her brother Tom is a 'loafer', his physiognomy marked by depravity: 'he had a head shaped by a bullet, small round eyes, red hair cropped short, and a thick neck' (49). Thereafter known simply as 'the loafer', Tom drinks, grumbles and 'minds the shop', which is a small counter outside the family's threadbare rooms. But it is Nelly's earnings as a seamstress that provide most of their income, and when she is unable to work Tom beats her and throws her out. Tom and Nelly echo and amend Marx's distinction within the surplus population between the 'lumpenproletariat proper' and the unemployed. 'Finally', writes Marx, 'the lowest sediment of the relative surplus population dwells in the sphere of pauperism. Apart from vagabonds, criminals, prostitutes, in short the actual lumpenproletariat, this social stratum consists of three categories.' Marx goes on to list the unemployed who are able to work but can find none, pauper children and orphans, and the disabled and demoralised, 'people who succumb to their incapacity for adaption'.[26] *A City Girl* draws this line in terms of gender, as Nelly becomes incapacitated yet still attempts to work, while her brother lives a merely parasitic existence. Harkness is not only drawing on this distinction between the surplus population and the lumpenproletariat, but also developing Engels's analysis of the relations between class and gender oppression from *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884). If for Engels 'within the family he is the bourgeois, and the wife represents the proletariat', then for Harkness the woman represents the casualised labourer and the man the lumpen proper, the filthy parasite upon precarious female productivity.[27]

This distinction is further developed in Harkness's next novel, *Out of Work*, a text that might also be considered a riposte to Engels's criticism. In her reply to Engels's letter, Harkness agreed that *A City Girl* suffers from 'a want of realism'. She goes on to write that her difficulties 'arise chiefly from want of confidence in my powers […] and also from my sex'.[28] The respectful, admiring tone of the letter is undeniable, but there might also be some pushback here, for Engels recommends Balzac for his depiction of 'the men of the future'. Reading somewhat against the grain, but with a strong warrant from Harkness's forceful personality in print and in her activism, we might suggest that she is slyly implying that Engels's conception of realism is unable to address the question of female labour, whether literary or manual.

On first glance, however, *Out of Work* appears to take Engels's criticisms to heart, as the novel features a number of politically committed characters, including an Anarchist poet, a socialist labourer befriended by the protagonist and several fiery street orators. The events of Bloody Sunday also make a central appearance. The narrator comments on the crowd assembled at Trafalgar Square:

> Was it true that the agitators were "'ungry," or was it false? Did the genuine unemployed come to these daily demonstrations, or were the demonstrators loafers who would not work, vagrants who wanted to play on the sympathies of the public, scum that must be allowed to die like dogs in the streets by order of the Political Economists? (197)

These rhetorical questions make it clear that Harkness's sympathy is with the demonstrators, precisely as they draw a moral distinction between loafers, vagrants and the 'genuine unemployed'. This distinction is then undercut by its alignment with the 'Political Economists' who would seek to cruelly reduce the surplus population, and yet it lingers as the justification for support of the demonstration – a series of musings deeply embedded in contemporary political debates. As Stedman-Jones has elaborated, a particularly crude set of arguments against charity emerged in the 1860s; drawing on vulgarised aspects of political economy, critics maintained that given the working-class's mobility and innate distaste for labour, charity was actively responsible for housing crises as the poor congregated in districts where charity was available and thus drove up rents. However, in the 1880s these arguments were increasingly challenged by a new set of liberal thinkers who argued that the 'legitimate' claims of the working class should be sharply distinguished from the residuum. For Samuel and Henrietta Barnett's 'practicable socialism' – a term influentially proposed in 1888 and also deployed by Alfred Toynbee – the distinction between the respectable poor and the 'loafer' became ever more important

precisely as they sought to counter the inhumane proposals of a bastardised political economy.[29] In other words, in this passage Harkness is caught in the characteristic double-bind of a 'practicable socialism' intensified by the concept of the lumpenproletariat. In order to value the demonstrators, an abject remainder to their steadfast commitment must be produced, a residuum that necessarily becomes the object of charity in order to distinguish the socialist moralist from the callous bourgeois – a charity that in turn undoes the agency of the surplus population as a whole, now the object of ameliorative intervention rather than potentially revolutionary formations.

And indeed, *Out of Work* makes no realist claims to figure the men of the future. As the title of the novel indicates, the narrative follows an unemployed carpenter, Jos, who moves to London in search of work but sinks into alcoholism and apathy following his inability to find work in the capital. Jilted by a lower-middle-class Methodist girl, broken down and without the strength to labour in the workhouse, he travels back to his old village and dies of starvation. The most obvious difference from *A City Girl* is that Harkness reverses the traditional gender structure of melodrama and narrows the class difference involved. More pertinently perhaps, during his travails Jos is patiently aided by a young girl known as 'the Squirrel' who is depicted as utterly ignorant but completely selfless – and supremely adaptable within London's informal economy. Jos is cast out of the reserve army of labour, or '*laissez-faire's* army' (120), as Harkness calls it, and then falls into the category of the 'demoralised' section of the surplus population, 'people who succumb to their incapacity for adaptation' as Marx writes in *Capital*. But the aptly-named Squirrel manages to produce a stream of sixpences by selling matches and flowers, and saves Jos from starvation (at least for a time). Jos 'could not understand how she made so much money' (190), and the reader only learns of how she does relatively late in the narrative, giving her income in the earlier part of the novel a certain mysteriousness. The usual suspicion, prostitution, is nowhere hinted at; rather, the Squirrel steals to provide Jos with sustenance. This is implied when the deputy of their doss house remarks that 'I'd rather trust her 'er than any one I know to steal me a dinner' (113) – an idiomatic usage meaning to rustle up or miraculously produce, but which also carries a striking sense of the trusted thief. Later on, she pays a relatively large fine for Jos, and answers his query as to the source of the cash with the firm reply, 'if I *did* steal it, Jack, it's none of your business' (192; emphasis in original).

From 1848 onwards, Marx and Engels increasingly argued that theft was totally at odds with the revolutionary discipline of the proletariat, a tendency that came to a head with Engels's 1850 recommendation that 'French workers, in every revolution, inscribe on the houses *Mort aux voleurs!* Death to thieves'.[30] However, in his earlier *Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), Engels

was more accepting of theft, carefully separating crimes against property from crimes against persons, and even arguing that stealing can be a sign of 'courage and passion' in the face of intolerable conditions.[31] Harkness appears to follow this earlier judgement rather than Marx and Engels's later condemnation. The Squirrel's altruistic theft also anticipates Wilhelm Reich's unorthodox revalorisation of the lumpenproletariat, which held that a human being faced with starvation who chooses to steal rather than to die of hunger displays the rudiments of class consciousness.[32] There is no doubt that the Squirrel displays far more solidarity than Jos, who merely takes her money and spends it on gin, while she 'lends' money not only to him, but also to fellow flower girls and doss-house lodgers, who in turn treat her with kindness. Moreover, when the pair are swept up by the events of Bloody Sunday, she displays an embryonic form of class consciousness. Urging Jos to join the crowd, 'her little heart beat fast', and she 'hissed loudly, not knowing why, but feeling the noise a relief in her intense excitement' (200). Jos is then assaulted by a policeman and unfairly arrested, and his companion gives evidence in court against the police. Finally, when Jos begins his long walk back to his village without notifying her, she hurls herself into the Thames in despairing loneliness.

The bleakly plotted narrative of *Out of Work* leaves behind the melodrama of *A City Girl*; indeed, the novel explicitly mocks melodramatic conventions as they appear in the trashy, escapist reading material of a foolish young woman (26). Instead, in its portrayal of Jos's downward spiral, *Out of Work* develops an insistently naturalist mode. As Bernadette Kirwan and others have stressed, Harkness was writing at the intense beginnings of Zola's Anglophone reception following the 1885 translation of *Germinale*.[33] Harkness explicitly proclaims her Zolerian commitments:

> They had locked him in a cell with three men, who had been run in the previous day for drinking. That place needs a Zola to do it justice. There was one long seat in it, on which sat a besotted drunkard and when Jos was led in the gaoler stumbled over a drunken man who lay on the floor, sick as a dog, from drinking. (204)

Here Harkness triples down on drunkenness in a condensed version of Zola's *L'Assommoir* (1877), with its congeries of alcoholics. Jos – whose alcoholism is explicitly marked as hereditary – is literally crammed into a bench with fellow hopeless inebriates, and thus tightly fitted into the paradigmatic naturalist descent; as he 'hopelessly' concludes, 'why not steal? Why not drink?' (205). As we have seen, however, the Squirrel's theft is supported by the narrative as an altruistic act of solidarity. Here, then, is Harkness's riposte to Engels, whose letter had stressed that Zola was a poor model for the socialist novelist; her

full embrace of a naturalist mode is a direct response to an ongoing project of representing unorthodox forms of female labour within the informal economy, 'problems of my sex' that are further developed in her next novel, *In Darkest London*.

## 'The Scum of Europe'

Written in the shadow of the riots of 1886–8 and before the Dockers' Strike of 1889 has provided more hope in the London poor, *In Darkest London* forms a bridge between Henry Maynard, Marx and Engels in the mid-nineteenth century, on to Jack London in the early twentieth and George Orwell in the interwar period. Harkness's novel offers a bleak vision of the East End poor, utterly bewildered, generally drunk and devoid of active resistance or any sense of purpose. Set against this disintegrating mass are a number of interventionist figures, most prominently Captain Lobe and a 'strong-minded proletarian spinster', Jane Hardy; the novel also features the stock figure of the depressed but committed slum doctor, and a well-meaning bourgeois girl, Ruth. In a return to an attenuated version of the conventional romance plot of *A City Girl*, the narrative progresses somewhat predictably towards Ruth and Lobe's engagement. Ever the stickler, General Booth won't let them marry until Lobe has completed two years' service in Australia, and the novel closes as his ship leaves for the colony.

*In Darkest London* contains Harkness's most extended meditations on the male lumpen. In the novel's first glimpse of the Whitechapel Road, 'the most cosmopolitan place in London', the 'loafer' emerges against a list of nationalities and ethnicities, including a 'Hottentot', a 'Jewess', an 'Algerian Merchant', a 'little Italian' and a 'small Russian' – all of whom are depicted as living together in a degree of multicultural amity. 'The East End loafer', however, 'is looked on as scum by his own nation, but he feels himself to be an Englishman, and able to kick the foreigner back to "his own dear native land" if only Government would believe in "English for the English," and give all foreigners "notice."'[34] This passage might initially seem to be an anti-racist gesture, echoing Harkness's defence of the immigrant in *Out of Work* ('we've no right to wish them away' [64]). And yet, the key phrase Harkness then immediately uses to describe the lumpen is 'the parasite, the creature who is content to exist on other people'. This racialises the lumpen by drawing on the usual categorisation of immigrants as parasites, which directly resurfaces later in the novel. The passage continues:

> There are many such creatures among us. We used to put them in the army, but competitive examinations have made that impossible; so now we send

> them to land agents, give them family livings, or let them emigrate. Almost every family has a loafer somewhere – a cousin or son who is 'good for nothing'. In the West End they haunt the clubs; in the East End they hang around the public-houses. They are kept by their families, and almost always have some fond female relation upon whom they sponge, until death puts an end to their sponging. (13)

Echoing Marx on the finance aristocracy, here Harkness is eager to point out that, as Jacques Rancière has further stressed, every class has 'its own lumpen', for the 'us' in these lines addresses the putative upper-middle-class reader, and we are told that 'every family has a loafer somewhere'.[35] Once again, the distinction is primarily one of gender, and this broadly classed yet strictly gendered definition of the 'parasite' is further underlined in the novel's depiction of Ruth's guardian, the 'apathetic' and manipulative Mr Pember: 'neither for Ruth nor any one else would he exert himself' (88). Developing Engels's statement that 'the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male', Harkness makes absolutely clear that this structure functions across society, from the surplus population to the upper classes.[36]

However, Harkness's major focus in the novel is with the destitute, drunken lumpenproletariat:

> They […] wait outside the market for jobs all day long. Gradually they sink into the scum of London, and become paupers, gaol-birds, and vagrants. It is a pitiable thing to see them deteriorating! First they grow reckless, then they become hopeless, finally they take to drinking. Starvation prevents them from doing mischief at present; but they add to the seething mass of discontent that is even now undermining the whole of society. (55)

There is a certain ambiguity to 'seething mass' and 'undermining' – this could initially be read as an economically determined revolutionary potential, recalling Marx's famous definition of the proletariat as the 'gravediggers of capitalism'. But read back through the hopeless drunkenness that precedes the discontent and it becomes clear that class consciousness is entirely foreclosed, and thus the 'whole of society' emerges as something as worthy of protection, a lost plenitude rather than the target of revolutionary action. In a series of further turns, the passage continues this movement between moments of radical hope that are continually undercut by a cloying moralism that would seek to protect 'society' rather than incite revolution; it concludes, 'for the sake of our children, we say "take warning"' (55). 'Pitiable' is of course a key term in this passage, a central aspect of lumpen representation inherited in part from Engels – particularly, again, from *The Condition of the Working Class*, which Harkness

cites elsewhere in the text. The despairing doctor reads a famous passage about slum conditions from Engels's study, beginning 'every evil conceivable is heaped upon the heads of the poor' (67), a moving passage of sympathetic identification, but when taken in isolation, devoid of all revolutionary hope. For Harkness's East Enders, revolutionary consciousness is occluded from the outset, and social and political commitment is thus transferred to figures of ameliorative intervention and sympathetic identification.

Chief among such figures is the 'earnest' salvationist Captain Lobe. While Harkness has some sardonic words for the Salvation Army, particularly its male members who 'strut about like so many small military peacocks' (194), her portrayal is generally very positive, as in her 1890 article on General Booth. Lobe is the novel's shining moral exemplar, pure of heart, devout of soul and burning with a desire to alleviate the suffering of the poor. His small stature and boyish appearance are stressed throughout the novel, which closes with the observation that 'he isn't a man, but a woman' (224). This striking line should give pause to accounts of Harkness's career that downplay her feminist commitments. For instance, noting her use of a pseudonym suggesting male power and disinterest in suffrage, Deborah Epstein Nord has argued that Harkness prioritised socialist commitment over feminist engagement.[37] However, Lobe's re-gendering surely radicalises Harkness's project throughout her earlier career of rigorously attributing political worth, industry and ethical commitment to women; while she was not an active supporter of suffrage nor explicitly feminist in her activism, Harkness's novels are in fact paradigmatic documents of late-nineteenth-century socialist feminism. This is not, however, to unproblematically valorise Harkness's project. For as Kathi Weeks has argued, feminist scholarship on waged and unwaged labour has at points fallen into two opposing traps that both problematically frame work as a heavily valorised normative category – on the one hand, the championing of unwaged domestic and affective labour, and on the other an insistence on the importance of the entry of women into the workplace.[38]

This becomes clearer still in the labour mistress Jane Hardy, a 'strong minded proletarian spinster', who tends to Ruth and other women in the area yet functions as the gatekeeper to the possibility of their labour. Hardy is gently mocked in the novel, but she is presented as more promising in terms of revolutionary potential than any other character in Harkness's London novels; tellingly, she is the only character referred to as a proletarian. A passionate feminist and socialist, Hardy is repeatedly depicted literally shaking her fist at male capitalists. But despite this glancing moment of parody, she is undoubtedly the most committed character in the novel, and as her name suggests, depicted as full of moral worth. Hardy gives Ruth a tour of her rounds of the slums, arguing that 'men must labour or beg. Women can always earn money' (113).

The immediate context is prostitution, that most lumpen of occupations, which the novel sees as a last resort for the daughters of destitute families. Hardy's concerns are, however, much broader; as the novel later proclaims, Hardy is a 'pioneer of her sex in questions connected with female labour' (221), and her observation that women can always earn money is a genuine insight into the particular conditions of casualised London labour. As the mouthpiece for Harkness's major project in her novels of the period, Hardy is thus clearly heavily valorised, overshadowing her occasionally parodic presentation.

Hardy is unashamedly racist and completely opposed to immigration of 'the scum of Europe' – a foreign menace, driving down wages for English workers and yet paradoxically lazy. In particular, Hardy makes clear that she'd 'never take on a Jewess' (84) for these reasons. As David Glover has argued, Hardy's anti-Semitism is particularly disturbing because it is represented as the result of hard won experience. Moreover, as she is so generally valorised in other senses, it's hard not to see some authorial approval operating here.[39] And indeed, Harkness's later novel *A Manchester Shirtmaker* descends into vicious anti-Semitic polemic as the novel's eponymous anti-hero kills her baby, having been cruelly cheated by a Jewish 'sweater': the novel's central narrative fulcrum is Jewish economic predation. This is placed in contradistinction to a representation of class-conscious female labour in a group of female garment workers who violently drive out the Jew from their workplace.

Vehemently opposed to Jewish immigration to England, Harkness also become invested in the social imperialist project of economically coerced emigration of the surplus population, a triple violence that marks her later career. *George Eastmont: Wanderer* entirely buckles under the strain of representing the class consciousness of the residuum, and repudiates the possibility of revolutionary change through a damning verdict on the undisciplined unemployed masses. Featuring a frankly disgusted gaze upon the 1886 riots, in which the rioters are depicted as utterly idiotic, the novel's shining aristocratic hero, Eastmont, sees resettlement in Australia as the answer to the woes of the London poor. In this novel, Harkness completes her move from socialism to social cleansing, advocating the continued colonisation of indigenous lands as an economically coerced home for the 'scum' of London. Her journey from melodrama to naturalism and finally to a naive picaresque also comes to rest here. The central character, Eastmont, is a bizarrely semi-committed nobleman who jumps quixotically from cause to cause, and yet he is depicted with no sense of the satire of Cervantes that one might reasonably expect and indeed Eastmont is drawn in clearly admiring tones. In Harkness's approving portrayal of Eastmont we see, then, the desertion of the typical for what Lukács would be right in calling the 'eccentric'.

## Women of the Future

Taking Harkness's authorship as a whole, it's hard not to conclude, *pace* Engels, that the suicidal thief of her most despairingly naturalist novel might remain Harkness's most important creation. It is of course outside the scope of this present essay to evaluate the place of theft for left politics or naturalist narrative. Rather I would like to underline how *Out of Work* anticipates the well-known gendered turn of post-Fordist labour, when the decline in manufacturing jobs and the growth of the service sector led to an ongoing crisis in wage-earning masculinity. At the same time, the Squirrel's negotiation of the informal economy presages the modes of labour forced upon workers by neoliberalism – she is, for instance, closely adequated to just-in-time production, and constantly shifts her field of operation according to the exigencies of the market. This leads to her abjection rather than figuring a muscular proletarian revolution; yet here there are surely deep reflections of the movements of labour and capital. Sadly typical of London's informal economy in the late-nineteenth century, the Squirrel in turn prefigures the neoliberal divisions of labour and the brittle bonds of heterosexual partnership in the face of poverty – the lumpen is always located outside of normative affective and sexual realms and yet provides some surprising entry points to the dialectics of typicality.

Read diagnostically, Harkness's career also tells a cautionary tale, revealing how the acute pressure brought to bear on the interrelations between race, gender and class by the concept of the lumpenproletariat catalyses, intensifies and further shapes already existing oppressive discourses. The depressing spectacle of supposedly opposed identity categories being played off against one another is all too often the result; Harkness moves with worrying ease from one 'parasitism' to another, all the while insisting upon the virtues of female labour. This also indicates the particular portability of lumpen tropes, an assemblage of violent slurs and ill-defined sociological typologies that can almost seamlessly switch from one object of moralistic disgust to another.

In the face of this woeful legacy, some new conceptual frameworks and vocabularies have recently offered some ways to circumvent the discourse of the lumpen. Michael Denning has offered the notion of 'wageless life' in opposition to the lumpenproletariat, while precarity has become an overarching master-concept for the left humanities; the multitude and the commons have also staked out new ground for further work in these directions.[40] Yet in their very attempt to detoxify poverty, there is the chance that some of these terms may become rather hollow, sometimes functioning purely negatively, at others so broadly as to become contentless. Precarity, for instance, has become so all-encompassing a concept as to lose a great deal of its descriptive acuity and radical charge – a danger from the outset perhaps, as from a certain perspective

it names almost all life under capitalism with the possible exception of the brief Fordist interregnum. In other words, while undoubtedly important, this new conceptual work is insufficient without a robust genealogy of the history it seeks to supervene. We should not attempt to merely purge the concept of the lumpenproletariat from the leftist political imaginary, but rather further explore its vicissitudes in order to not repeat the retrenchments it calls forth. Harkness's despairing women of the future are one important formation from which to begin this inquiry.

## Notes

1 Friedrich Engels, Letter to Margaret Harkness, April 1888 in Margaret Harkness, *A City Girl* (1887), ed. Deborah Mutch (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2015), 135. The variants in translation in brackets are from, respectively, this edition, *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader*, eds Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (London: Blackwell, 1996), 41, and *Literature and Art by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Selections from Their Writings* (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 43.

2 Gareth Stedman-Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society* (London: Verso, 2013), 337–49.

3 Engels, *Times*, 10 February 1886, cited in Stedman-Jones, *Outcast London*, 453.

4 Engels, 'On the London Dock Strike' (1889), in *Marx and Engels: Articles on Britain* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 401.

5 Engels to E. Bernstein, 22 August 1889 in *Marx and Engels on Britain* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953), 521, emphasis in original.

6 This biographical sketch draws on the following accounts of Harkness's life: Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 183–7, 292–7; Ellen Ross (ed.), *Slum Travelers: Ladies and London Poverty, 1860–1920* (Berkeley, CA, Los Angeles, CA and London: University of California Press, 2007), 89–90; Deborah Mutch, 'Introduction' to *A City Girl*, 27–34; and Bernadette Kirwan, 'Introduction to John Law (Margaret Harkness)', in Margaret Harkness, *Out of Work*, ed. Bernadette Kirwan (London: Merlin, 1900), v-xix.

7 John Law (Margaret Harkness), 'Salvation vs. Socialism – In Praise of General Booth', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 October 1890, 1–2.

8 Harkness, 'A Year of My Life', *New Review* 5 (1891): 377, qtd in Kirwan, 'Introduction', xii.

9 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* in *Marx: Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11.

10 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* in *Marx: Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 153.

11 See Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, Vol. II: *The Politics of Social Classes* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 454–6.

12 This view has been disputed by Jacques Rancière, who argues that Marx's lumpenproletariat is a 'phantasmal image' covering up the fact that great numbers of Paris proletarians made up the *Gardes Mobile*. See *The Philosopher and His Poor,* trans. John Dury et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 96.

13 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (New York: Cosimo, 2008), 75.

14 Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, 124.

15 Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 284.
16 Peter Stallybrass, 'Marx and Heterogeneity: Thinking the Lumpenproletariat', *Representations*, 31, Special Issue: The Margins of Identity in Nineteenth-Century England (Summer, 1990): 70.
17 See, *inter alia*, Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 387–8, and Stallybrass, 'Marx and Heterogeneity', 82.
18 Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1 trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 767.
19 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 2001), esp. 103–4.
20 Nathaniel Mills, *Ragged Revolutionaries: The Lumpenproletariat and African American Marxism in Depression-Era Literature* (Amhurst, MA and Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2017), 35.
21 Georg Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe', in *Writer and Critic*, ed. and trans. Arthur Kahn (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2005), 110-148.
22 See Wulf Koepke, *The Critical Reception of Alfred Döblin's Major Novels* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005), 43.
23 See Glyn Salton-Cox, *Queer Communism and the Ministry of Love: Sexual Revolution in British Writing of the 1930s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).
24 See George Ciccariello-Maher, *We Created Chavez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 220–32.
25 See, *inter alia*, Kevin Swafford, *Class in Late-Victorian Britain: The Narrative Concern with Hierarchy and Its Reproduction* (Youngstown, NY: Cambria Press, 2007), 45, and Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Slow Print: Literary Radicalism and Late Victorian Print Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 97.
26 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 767.
27 Friedrich Engels, *On the Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, trans. Alick West (London: Penguin, 2010), 105.
28 Margaret Harkness, Letter to Engels, April 1888, in *A City Girl*, 136.
29 Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, 267, 302.
30 Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany* (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishers, 1956), 23, also qtd. in Mills, *Ragged Revolutionaries*, 23.
31 Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, trans. Florence Kelley-Wischnewstsky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 141, 98.
32 Wilhelm Reich, *What is Class Consciousness?* (1934), in *Sex-Pol: Essays 1929–34*, ed. Lee Baxandale, trans. Anna Bostock et al. (New York: Vintage, 1972), 294.
33 Kirwan, 'Introduction', xii, and Mutch, 'Introduction', 20–21.
34 Harkness, *In Darkest London*, 13.
35 Rancière, *Philosopher and His Poor*, 93.
36 Engels, *Origin of the Family*, 96.
37 Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets*, 196–7; see also Eileen Sypher, 'The Novels of Margaret Harkness', *Turn-of-the-Century Women* 1 (Winter 1984): 23-25.
38 Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 12–13.
39 David Glover, *Literature, Immigration, and Diaspora in Fin-de-Siècle England: A Cultural History of the 1905 Aliens Act* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 70.
40 Michael Denning, 'Wageless Life', *New Left Review* 66 (November–December 2010): 79–97.