



## Henry Mayhew: journalist, social investigator, and foreshadower of qualitative research\*

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Received for publication in July 2010.  
Approved for publication in April 2011.

Translated by Diane Grosklaus Whitty.

NUNES, Everardo Duarte. Henry Mayhew: journalist, social investigator, and foreshadower of qualitative research. *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos*, Rio de Janeiro, v.19, n.3, jul.-set.2012. Disponível em <http://www.scielo.br/hcsm>.

### Abstract

As a journalist, Henry Mayhew recorded daily life in London in the latter half of the nineteenth century. His approach remains of interest to historians and social scientists today in that it foreshadowed qualitative research. The article highlights methodological aspects of Mayhew's investigations and analyzes two of his reports, one on a cholera outbreak and the other on a female street vendor. It also addresses some analyses that have critiqued his work.

Keywords: Henry Mayhew (1812-1887); social history; cholera; street vendor; nineteenth-century London.

There are, of course, two methods of dealing philosophically with every subject – deductively and inductively.

The deductive method is the mode of *using* knowledge and the inductive method the mode of *acquiring it* (emphasis in the original).

*Henry Mayhew* (1968, v. 4, p.2).

The journalist Henry Mayhew (1812-1887) was always attuned to the events of London in his day, which was the second half of the nineteenth century. His research and reports made him a forerunner of qualitative studies, rendering irrelevant the amount of quantitative data he collected. Further, he left an invaluable record of the cholera epidemic and of living conditions among London's laborers and poor. The prime feature of his central book, *London labour and the London poor*<sup>1</sup>, was its focus on ethnographic descriptions of London's street workers and the poor within a context of industrial transformations and changes to England's urban spaces. The book was preceded by publication of his newspaper reports in the *Morning Chronicle*.<sup>2</sup>

In showcasing Mayhew and his contributions, we should not overlook contemporaries of his who devoted themselves to studying the conditions of urban life, many of whom offered even earlier descriptions of poverty albeit developing the topic differently. Such was the case of Eugène Buret (1810-1842), who wielded great influence over socialist thought in the early 1840s and was cited by Marx and Walter Benjamin. For Vatin (2006, p.70, 84), Buret "popularized a view on industrial pauperism" and concluded that "English-style industrialization and pauperism are two sides of the same social state".

Another noteworthy French author was Louis René Villermé (1782-1863), physician, economist, and hygienist who produced a number of studies, including some on the "physical and moral state" of cotton industry workers; he also fought against child labor. The work of Frédéric Le Play (1806-1882) was similarly valuable in the early days of empirical sociology; Le Play conducted an investigation that lasted "over two and a half decades, during which he gathered information and wrote monographs about families from nearly all regions of Europe" (Botelho, 2002, p.519).

In many regards, Mayhew's work distinguishes itself from that produced by most authors who addressed urban and labor issues from the late first half to the close of the nineteenth century, particularly because of the original methodology he used in collecting his data, as we will see in this article. It should be added that after being consigned to a long period of oblivion, his work again became a topic of study, with his social research drawing new interpretations. Of these studies, which approached their subject with different interests in mind, the most noteworthy include Anne Humpherys (1977), author of the most complete biography of Mayhew; Edward P. Thompson and Ellen Yeo (1984); Gertrude Himmelfarb (1973); Karel Williams (1981); James Bennet (1981); Olga Maria Trabulo (2002); Bryan S. Green (2002); John Scalan (2007); John D. Rosenberg's introduction to a new edition of *London labour and the London poor* (1968); Victor Neuburg's introduction to a selection of texts from the four volumes of the 1865 edition (1985); and Bertrand Taithe's

introduction to a new edition of Mayhew's correspondence with his readers (1996). Likewise worthy of mention is the delicate work of Seed (2005), who transformed around one hundred of Mayhew's reports into poems, as well as Chris Louttit's review (2006) of four recent books ('new Victorian novels') that build upon Mayhew either as a source for material or intertextually.

Generally speaking, Mayhew's work can be classified as falling within the fields of protosociology, ethnography, social philosophy, or social journalism. However, what stands out is his methodological perspicacity in the realm of social research, especially if we remember that he lived in the period preceding the advent of sociology as a science (so-called classic sociology), which only came into being in France and Germany in 1890. Rocquin (2006, p.3) argues that, despite the import accorded *Principles of sociology* (1874-1896), written by English philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), sociology only emerged as an academic discipline in England after 1950, later than in the United States, Germany, and France. Similarly, as we will see in this article, Mayhew was working with ethnography even before its 'officialization' by the London Royal Anthropological Society in 1894.

This article explores Mayhew's work from two angles, first highlighting methodological aspects of his investigations based on two of his reports.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, it addresses some of the aforementioned analyses that have critiqued his work. For these purposes, I have selected a report on a cholera outbreak and another on a female street vendor, both of which I see as emblematic of the author's social concerns. The first examines a problem frequently faced by London's population and strategic to Mayhew's exposé of the atrocious living conditions to which a large share of Londoner's were then subject and which appeared in a periodical of wide circulation. The second highlights the daily lives of street workers, illustrated by the case of a young vendor; here it should be remembered that child workers and young workers in general were a special focus of Mayhew's, who coined the expression "street children" in 1851.

### **Person, era, and work**

Until some time ago, it was said that little information was available on this London figure whose life spanned 74 years, from 1812 to 1887. It was only 90 years after his death, in 1977, that Anne Humpherys published what is deemed his most complete biography.

Mayhew was born at the height of the Luddite movement, which opposed the mechanization brought by the Industrial Revolution, and during his lifetime he observed the trajectory of this process and of the English proletariat, the unemployed, and street vendors. He was two years old when Stevenson invented the steam locomotive and eight when London installed its first public lighting. He also saw the British parliamentary approve the right of free association (1824) and the New Poor Law (1834) and witnessed the birth of workers associative movements, including the London Workingmen's Association (1838), which marked the beginning of the Chartism movement that was to last a decade, and the International Workingmen's Association (1864). His lifetime coincided with the period of England's greatest industrial and technological progress, of greatest colonial expansion, and of workers' struggles for better living and working conditions,

better wages, the end of child labor, and the regulation of women's labor. At the age of 25, he watched Queen Victoria rise to the British throne, where she would reign from 1838 to 1901. During the Victorian era, London became the world's biggest city, with its densely concentrated population rising from 958,863 in 1801 to 2,362,236 in 1851, 2,803,989 in 1861, 3,254,260 in 1871, and 4,231,431 in 1891, while thousands of people lived in poverty and resided in overpopulated tenements with pathetic sanitation. As a display of might, England held the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations in 1851, the world's first industry expo. Mayhew wrote about the exhibition, and eleven years later attended the Great London Exposition, also called the International Exhibition of 1862, where 36 countries put major advances in industry, technology, and the arts on display.

Henry Philip Mayhew was born into a large wealthy family on November 25, 1812, in London, where he died on July 25, 1887. It is said that he had sixteen siblings (although the figure varies depending upon source) and was fourth in birth order.<sup>4</sup> His father, Joshua Dorset Joseph Mayhew, was an eminent London barrister; described as stubborn and autocratic, he supposedly demanded that his children address him as 'sir' and remain standing until he granted them permission to sit (Humpherys, 1977, p.2). He thought all his children should take up the law but only one of them did: Alfred, who became a solicitor. Thomas, Horace, Henry, and August went into journalism, Edward chose the theater and then veterinary medicine, while Julius took up art and photography. In some texts, his children portrayed him as a tyrant or made ironic fun of his "respectability" (p.4).

Mayhew began his education at Westminster, a secular school that traced its roots to the twelfth century and the alma mater of such famous figures as John Locke and Jeremy Bentham, but he was unable to adapt to its harsh discipline and ran away at the age of 15. He was then sent to India, where his brother worked for a government body. Upon his return one year later, he tried his hand at law but did not meet with success. The story goes that he forgot to submit some documents to the Tribunal of Justice, almost getting his father arrested. In 1831, he took an interest in popular journalism and for eight years worked for *Figaro in London* and *The Thief* in addition to writing plays. In 1835, he fled to Paris to escape creditors and there joined his friends Douglas Jerrold and William Thackeray, known as the first generation of British bohemians. In 1841, he and Mark Lemon partnered to found *Punch Magazine*, whose pages became home to important writers and illustrators. His last article for the magazine came out in 1845, when he embarked on a new publishing adventure, the *Iron Magazine*, which left him bankrupt in 1846.

In 1844, Mayhew married Jane Jerrold, daughter of his friend and journalism colleague Douglas Jerrold, with whom he would later break ties. The marriage was marked by many separations, none of which definitive, including long stays in Germany without his wife in the 1860s. There is, however, a reference to a trip to Germany with the entire family (he, his wife, and their two children, Athol and Amy), an experience that engendered a book on the life and customs of Germans, which bears this interesting dedication to Jane: "To my wife, literally my right hand, scribbling to my dictation" (Taithe, 1996, p.67). It is reported that when Jane died in 1880 at the age of 53, her husband was not with her (Neuburg, 1985, p.XV). His biographers have observed that Mayhew was a talented man of many abilities and ideas but with an "unstable temperament" (p.XIV).

Before devoting himself to his work on London, which was his great project, Mayhew and his brother August wrote some popular novels that addressed moral and social issues.

Mayhew produced a vast amount of material on London and its poor, its street vendors, and its urban problems, first appearing in newspapers and later in book form. In 1849 and 1850, he published 82 letters in the *Morning Chronicle*, which were announced on October 18 as the beginning of a series of articles providing “a full and detailed description of the moral, intellectual, material, and physical condition of the industrial poor throughout England” (cited in Thompson and Yeo, 1984, p.22). From 1850 through 1852, he published 63 issues of *London labour and the London poor*, a weekly periodical on people who lived in the streets, especially vendors. In mid-1851, the last issues of this periodical included an article on prostitution, seen as a sub-category of London’s poor (Williams, 1981, p.237). According to Williams, a diverse array of letters in the column “Answers to correspondents” were accompanied by the early seeds of Mayhew’s formulation of a political economic theory conceived as an alternative to orthodox political economy. He also published: *Low wages, their causes, consequences and remedies* (Mayhew, 1851); the fourth volume of *London labour and the London poor*, entitled “The criminal prisons of London and scenes of prison life” (Mayhew, Binny, 1862), which was about prostitution and crime<sup>5</sup>; a history of the Mormons; and a book on educational philosophy. In 1851, when England held the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, he wrote of the misadventures of a peasant couple and their children who visited the expo.<sup>6</sup> The tale had a comic side but some parts discussed the “strengths and weaknesses of the exhibition, and most important the attitude of the lower classes toward it” (Humpherys, 1977, p.13).

In 1861-1862, *London labour and the London poor* was released in four volumes. According to Williams (1981, p.238), “different historiographic readings of Mayhew are based upon appeal to different texts”. He also points out that this book has been used to condemn Mayhew as an “undisciplined journalist with an overdeveloped taste to colorful detail”. But he adds that a reading of the *Morning Chronicle* letters and their “Answers” reveal a serious author. In comparing *Morning* and *London labour*, Williams (1981, p.266) states that “the biographies were no longer, as in the *Morning Chronicle*, trade histories. They were now lives, dramatic renditions of personal history ‘here given as it was spoken’ [as Mayhew wrote (1968, p.4)]”. In his analysis of the latter book, Williams (1981, p.265) observes that Mayhew was endeavoring to produce “a kind of empirical ethnology which is distinct from the theoretical ethnology”.

On the other hand, Himmelfarb (1973, p.710, 731) criticizes Mayhew’s work as representing only a numerically limited population, not reflective of the whole of London’s workers and poor.<sup>7</sup> Another question raised by this author is whether Mayhew’s work successfully achieves the understanding implied in its title, since, according to Himmelfarb, he did not work with “the culture of poverty” but with “the culture of a small subgroup of the poor”. Although Mayhew presents abundant quantitative information, Himmelfarb argues that he “details a story of essentially isolated individuals” (Humpherys, 1977, p.63) and in this sense Mayhew’s work and that of Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) are complementary, since Engel’s *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, published just a few years before Mayhew’s book, displays a degree of generalization not found in the latter (p.63).<sup>8</sup>

### **The summer of 1849 and the cholera outbreak**

On September 24, 1849, Mayhew published the article “A visit to the cholera districts of Bermondsey” in the *Morning Chronicle*. It was summer, and for three months London had been swept by a cholera outbreak, killing over 12,800 people. The journalist began his article by recalling a Western fable about a city invaded by poisonous snakes that attacked and killed everyone they came up against. In his words: “The citizens, thinking them sent from Heaven as a scourge for their sins, kept praying that the visitation might be removed from them, until scarcely a house remained unsmitten. At length, however, concludes the parable, the eyes of the people were opened; for, after all their prayers and fastings, they found that the eggs of the poisonous serpents were hatched in the muck-heaps that surrounded their own dwellings”. Mayhew goes on to say that the epidemic then furiously assailing the city “has taught us that the masses of filth and corruption round the metropolis are, as it were, the nauseous nests of plague and pestilence”.

In this detailed, almost literary, report, Mayhew affirms that London could be “mapped out pathologically” and morbidity and mortality distributed across its territory, indicating the places hit by cholera and typhoid. Mayhew (1849, p.4) points out that

as season follows season, so does disease follow disease in the quarters that may be more literally than metaphorically styled the plague-spots of London. If the seasons are favourable, and typhus does not bring death to almost every door, then influenza and scarlatina fill the workhouses with the families of the sick. So certain and regular are the diseases in their returns, that each epidemic, as it comes back summer after summer, breaks out in the self-same streets as it appeared on its former visit, with but this slight difference, that if at its last visitation it began at the top of the street, and killed its way down, this time it begins at the bottom, and kills its way as surely up the lines of houses.

In his analysis of Bermondsey, he mentions the cholera pestilence on Jacob’s Island – which he calls “the Jessore of London”, an allusion to the densely populated district of Bangladesh where it is believed the great cholera pandemic of 1817 had its start. “Here stands, as it were, the very capital of cholera, the Jessore of London - Jacob’s island, a patch of ground insulated by the common sewer. Spared by the fire of London, the houses and comforts of the people in this loathsome place have scarcely known any improvement since that time. The place is a century behind even the low and squalid districts that surround it” (Mayhew, 1849, p.4).

Mayhew (1849, p.4) provides a detailed description of the changes in this urban area of London, which had become a place of putrid waters and heaps of foul-smelling excrements. Added to the rank air that had “literally the smell of a graveyard” was the presence of water. In his words: “The water is covered with a scum almost like a cobweb, and prismatic with grease. In it float large masses of green rotting weed, and against the posts of the bridges are swollen carcasses of dead animals, almost bursting with the gases of putrefaction”.

Writing of the place called Jacob’s Island, known for its tenements and made famous by Charles Dickens in *Oliver Twist* (1837), Mayhew (1849, p.4) writes that:

the striking peculiarity of Jacob’s Island consists in the wooden galleries and sleeping-rooms at the back of the houses which overhang the dark flood, and are built upon piles,

so that the place has positively the air of a Flemish street, flanking a sewer instead of a canal; while the little rickety bridges that span the ditches and connect court with court, give it the appearance of the Venice of drains, where channels before and behind the houses do duty for the ocean. ... At the back of nearly every house that boasts a square foot or two of outlet – and the majority have none at all – are pig-sties. In front waddle ducks, while cocks and hens scratch at the cinderheaps. Indeed the creatures that fatten on offal are the only living things that seem to flourish here.

In describing the residents, he says:

The inhabitants themselves show in their faces the poisonous influence of the mephitic air they breathe. Either their skins are white, like parchment, telling of the impaired digestion, the languid circulation, and the coldness of the skin peculiar to persons suffering from chronic poisoning, or else their cheeks are flushed hectically, and their eyes are glassy, showing the wasting fever and general decline of the bodily functions. The brown, earthlike complexion of some, and their sunk eyes, with the dark areola round them, tell you that the sulphuretted hydrogen of the atmosphere in which they live has been absorbed into the blood; while others are remarkable for the watery eye exhibiting the increased secretion of tears so peculiar to those who are exposed to the exhalations of hydrosulphate of ammonia (Mayhew, 1849, p.4).

Mayhew (1849, p.4) then talks about these harmful gases, citing studies that proved their lethal effect on various animal species and stating that “men who were engaged in excavating the Thames Tunnel suffered severely during the work from the presence of this gas in the atmosphere in which they were obliged to labour”.

At this point in his report, Mayhew says the person who was accompanying him, doctor Martin, advised him that a young girl was dying of cholera and that others had recently fallen victim to the same illness.

They visit the entire area, and Mayhew identifies cases not only of cholera but also of typhus and scarlet fever. He takes note of what one informant reports: “At the back of the house was an open sewer, and the privies were full to the seat.” During his visit, a woman has this to say: “Neither I nor my children know what health is”. She goes on: “But what is one to do? We must live where our bread is”. The woman explains that she had tried to leave the house but it was not possible; she reports on the precarious living conditions of people residing there, who “earn some times as much as 12s. a day, and then for weeks doing nothing”.

Mayhew goes back to talking about the toxic gases: “One fact, says an eminent writer in toxicology, is worthy of the attention of medical jurists, namely, that the respiration of an atmosphere only slightly impregnated with the gases emanating from drains and sewers, may, if long continued, seriously affect an individual and cause death” (Mayhew, 1849, p.4). He resumes his report, telling how he went up and down London Street trying to locate the source of the cholera outbreak.

We then journeyed on to London Street, down which the tidal ditch continues its course. In No. 1 of this street the cholera first appeared seventeen years ago, and spread up it with fearful virulence; but this year it appeared at the opposite end, and ran down it with like severity. As we passed along the reeking banks of the sewer, the sun shone upon a narrow slip of the water. In the bright light it appeared the colour of strong green tea,

and positively looked as solid as black marble in the shadow – indeed it was more like watery mud than muddy water; and yet we were assured this was the only water the wretched inhabitants had to drink. As we gazed in horror at it, we saw drains and sewers emptying their filthy contents into it; we saw a whole tier of doorless privies in the open road, common to men and women, built over it; we heard bucket after bucket of filth splash into it, and the limbs of the vagrant boys bathing in it seemed by pure force of contrast, white as Parian marble.

And yet, as we stood doubting the fearful statement, we saw a little child, from one of the galleries opposite, lower a tin can with a rope to fill a large bucket that stood beside her. In each of the balconies that hung over the stream the self-same tub was to be seen in which the inhabitants put the mucky liquid to stand, so that they may, after it has rested for a day or two, skim the fluid from the solid particles of filth, pollution, and disease. As the little thing dangled her tin cup as gently as possible into the stream, a bucket of night-soil was poured down from the next gallery.

In this wretched place we were taken to a house where an infant lay dead of the cholera. We asked if they really did drink the water? The answer was, They were obliged to drink the ditch, without they could beg or thief a pailful of water. "But have you spoken to your landlord about having it laid on for you?" "Yes, sir and he says he will do it, and do it, but we know him better than to believe him." "Why, sir," cried another woman, who had shot out from an adjoining room, 'he won't even give us a little whitewash, though we tell him we'll willingly do the work ourselves: and look here, sir,' she added, "all the tiles have fallen off, and the rain pours in wholesale." We had scarcely left the house when a bill caught our eye, announcing that 'this valuable estate' was to be sold! From this spot we crossed the little shaky bridge into Providence-buildings – a narrow neck of land set in sewers. Here, in front of the houses, were small gardens that a table-cloth would have covered. Still the one dahlia that here raised its round red head made it a happier and brighter place. Never was colour so grateful to the eye. All we had looked at had been so black and dingy, and had smelt so much of churchyard clay, that this little patch of beauty was brighter and greener than ever was oasis in the desert. Here a herd of children came out, and stared at us like sheep.

One child our guide singled out from the rest. She had the complexion of tawed leather, and her bright, glassy eyes were sunk so far back in her head, that they looked more like lights shining through the hollow sockets of a skull than a living head, and her bones seemed ready to start through the thin layer of skin.

We were told she had had the cholera twice. Her father was dead of it. "But she, sir," said a woman addressing us, 'won't die. Ah! if she'd had plenty of victuals and been brought up less hardy she would have been dead and buried long ago, like many more. And here's another,' she added, pushing forward a long thin woman in rusty black. "Why I've know'd her eat as much as a quartern loaf at a meal, and you can't fatten her no how." Upon this there was a laugh. But in the woman's bloodless cheeks and blue lips we saw that she like the rest was wasting away from the influence of the charnel-like atmosphere around her.

Continuing with his visit, Mayhew hears the report of five recent cases of cholera. His descriptions of the environs, the people, and their reactions are meticulous. For example, the boy who lived in one of the houses said it would not be a good idea for the journalist to come in; in another, a woman was happy to meet someone who "sympathiz[ed] with her sufferings" and had come to visit her where she had lived for nine years, in a dark and gloomy place with no ventilation, a veritable pigsty (Mayhew, 1849, p.4).

Mayhew (1849, p.4) remarks on the weariness and weakness of ailing bodies and associates this physical situation with “the mephitic vapours they continually inhale [which] leads them – we may say, *forces* them – to seek an unnatural stimulus in the gin-shop indeed, the publicans of Jacob’s Island drive even a more profitable trade than the landlords themselves”.

And he observes:

What wonder, then, since debility is one of the predisposing conditions of cholera, that – even if these stenches of the foul tidal ditch be not the ‘direct’ cause of the disease – that the impaired digestive functions, the languid circulation, the depression of mind produced by the continued inhalation of the noxious gases of the tidal ditch, together with the intemperance that it induces – the cold, damp houses – and, above all, the quenching of the thirst and cooking of the food with water saturated with the very excrements of their fellow creatures, should make Jacob’s Island notorious as the Jessore of England. [emphasis in the original]

This article was Mayhew’s first warning cry about the impact of this disease and about the need to investigate the living conditions of the working classes in England and Wales. Addressed to editor John Douglas Cook, Mayhew’s suggestion that such an investigation be undertaken was accepted, and three other journalists – Angus Reach, Charles Mackay, and Shirley Borroks – joined the project, with Mayhew focusing on London and the team, on other places in England and Wales. A series of daily articles was published through 1850.

### **The life of a street-seller**

This report is one of Mayhew’s countless descriptions of the lives of London’s street people, published in the first volume of *London labour and the London poor*, where the author (1968, no p.) notes in the preface: “It surely may be considered curious as being the first attempt to publish the history of a people, from the lips of the people themselves – giving a literal description of their labour, their earnings, their trials, and their sufferings, in their own ‘unvarnished’ language; and to portray the condition of their homes and their families by personal observation of the places, and direct communion with the individuals”.

While preserving the marked empirical nature of his work, Mayhew does find time to address more general issues. Bennet (1981, p.271) said that “the typical order of presentation in both the *Morning Chronicle* series and *London labour* is to begin with a general description of an occupation or a place, which usually includes the numbers of people or items involved, often presented in a chart”. From the outset of his monumental research on workers and the poor, Mayhew wrote about “wandering tribes in general” (he divided people into wanderers and settlers) and the wandering tribes of England. Since classification was another feature of his work, I will briefly describe the system that opens *London labour*, for it is in this section that the selected report is found.

For Mayhew, “street folk” could be defined in these terms: “Those who obtain their living in the streets of the metropolis are a very large and varied class; indeed, the means resorted to in order ‘to pick up a crust’, as the people call it, in the public thoroughfares

(and such in many instances it 'literally' is) are so multifarious that the mind is long baffled in its attempts to reduce them to scientific order or classification" (Mayhew, 1968, p.3, emphasis in the original). He goes on to "arrange" people into six distinct "genera or kinds" – "street-sellers; street-buyers; street-finders; street-performers, artists, and showmen; street-artisans, or working pedlars; and street-labourers" (Mayhew, 1968, p.3) – which he then defines in detail. I will take the story of a young apple-seller, as reported below, to illustrate these many categories.

Thus begins Mayhew's (1968, p.45-47) report:

I wished to have obtained a statement from the girl whose portrait is here given, but she was afraid to give the slightest information about the habits of her companions, lest they should recognize her by the engraving and persecute her for the revelations she might make. After disappointing me some dozen times, I was forced to seek out some other coster girl.

The one I fixed upon was a fine-grown young woman of eighteen. She had a habit of curtsying to every question that was put to her. Her plaid shawl was tied over the breast, and her cotton-velvet bonnet was crushed in with carrying her basket. She seemed dreadfully puzzled where to put her hands, at one time tucking them under her shawl, warming them at the fire, or measuring the length of her apron, and when she answered a question she invariably addressed the fireplace. Her voice was husky from shout.<sup>9</sup>

The street-seller goes on to say:

My mother has been in the streets selling all her lifetime. Her uncle learnt her the markets and she learnt me. When business grew bad she said to me, "Now you shall take care on the stall, and I'll go and work out charing". The way she learnt me the markets was to judge of the weight of the baskets of apples, and then said she, "Always bate 'em down, a'most a half". I always liked the street-life very well, that was if I was selling. I have mostly kept a stall myself, but I've known gals as walk about with apples, as have told me that the weight of the baskets is sich that the neck cricks, and when the load is took off, it's just as if you'd astiff neck, and the head feels as light as a feather. The gals begins working very early at our work; the parents makes them go out when a'most babies. There's a little gal, I'm sure she an't more than half-past seven, that stands selling water-cresses next my stall, and mother was saying, "Only look there, how that little one has to get her living afore she a'most knows what a penn'orth means".

During the interview, the vendor has this to say about her family:

There's six of us in family, and father and mother makes eight. Father used to do odd jobs with the gas-pipes in the streets, and when work was slack we had very hard times of it. Mother always liked being with us at home, and used to manage to keep us employed out of mischief – she'd give us an old gown to make into pinafores for the children and such like! She's been very good to us, has mother, and so's father. She always liked to hear us read to her whilst she was washing or such like! And then we big ones had to learn the little ones. But when father's work got slack, if she had no employment charing, she'd say, "Now I'll go and buy a bushel of apples", and then she'd turn out and get a penny that way. I suppose by sitting at the stall from nine in the morning till the shops shuts up – say ten o'clock at night, I can earn about 1s. 6d. a day. It's all according to the apples – whether they're good or not – what we makes. If I'm unlucky, mother will say, "Well, I'll go out to-morrow and see what I can do"; and if I've done well, she'll say "Come you're

a good hand at it; you've done famous". Yes, mother's very fair that way. Ah! there's many a gal I knows whose back has to suffer if she don't sell her stock well; but, thank God! I never get more than a blowing up. My parents is very fair to me.

The vendor goes on to share her perception of the lives of "gals":

I dare say there ain't ten out of a hundred gals what's living with men, what's been married Church of England fashion. I know plenty myself, but I don't, indeed, think it right. It seems to me that the gals is fools to be 'ticed away, but, in coarse, they needn't go without they likes. This is why I don't think it's right. Perhaps a man will have a few words with his gal, and he'll say, "Oh! I ain't obligated to keep her!" and he'll turn her out: and then where's that poor gal to go? Now, there's a gal I knows as came to me no later than this here week, and she had a dreadful swole face and a awful black eye; and I says, "Who's done that?" and she says, says she, "Why, Jack" – just in that way; and then she says, says she, "I'm going to take a warrant out tomorrow". Well, he gets the warrant that same night, but she never appears again him, for fear of getting more beating. That don't seem to me to be like married people ought to be. Besides, if parties is married, they ought to bend to each other; and they won't, for sartain, if they're only living together. A man as is married is obligated to keep his wife if they quarrels or not; and he says to himself, says he, "Well, I may as well live happy, like." But if he can turn a poor gal off, as soon as he tires of her, he begins to have noises with her, and then gets quit of her altogether.

The street-seller next talks about how she sees life with men: "I've often heard the boys boasting of having ruined gals, for all the world as if they was the first noblemen in the land".

Another interesting topic addressed in the interview is religion:

Only last night father was talking about religion. We often talks about religion. Father has told me that God made the world, and I've heerd him talk about the first man and woman as was made and lived – it must be more than a hundred years ago – but I don't like to speak on what I don't know. Father, too, has told me about our Saviour what was nailed on a cross to suffer for such poor people as we is.

The girl goes on to tie this in with related topics: whether or not to forgive an enemy, the intense religiosity of young girls, the creation of the world, God, and good and evil people.

Mayhew closes his report with the observation that the statements he gathered might seem "curious and extravagant" to the "uninitiated", but that "nevertheless it is here given as it was spoken; and it was spoken with an earnestness that proved the poor girl looked upon it as a subject, the solemnity of which forced her to be truthful".

## Comments

If I have a model, it's Mayhew.  
*Terkel* (cited in Bennet, 1981, p.11)

The cholera outbreak described by Mayhew was not the only that occurred in London; another is known to have taken place earlier, in 1832, leaving around 800 dead in East End

and 32,000 across Great Britain. In the introduction to "Diary of an epidemic", Freedland (2003) says, "Although cholera fatalities never approach the levels of TB or dysentery, the disease is particularly terrifying to the British because of its novelty, rapid onset, and gruesome symptoms". The outbreak reported by Mayhew in 1849, which started the previous year, wreaked more havoc than the previous, killing around 53,000 people in England and Wales. John Snow, while examining a number of patients at the beginning of the outbreak, noticed that they presented with digestive problems, and he presumed they had ingested contaminated food or water; he reasoned that if the victims had absorbed cholera "venom" by breathing contaminated air, then, according to miasmatic theories, their symptoms would have appeared in their noses or lungs and not their digestive tracts. In 1849, he published the pamphlet "On the mode of communication of cholera", which had little impact on his colleagues, such as Edwin Chadwick.<sup>10</sup> Like many others, Mayhew thought cholera originated in the atmosphere, that is, in air contaminated by rotting matter; it was only in 1854, when a new epidemic caused 10,738 deaths in London, that John Snow managed to prove that water was the main agent for spreading the disease. Mayhew's description leaves no doubt about his position on the disease and its causes, but it also evinces his concern with the direct observation of events.

In regard to Mayhew's reports on workers, Neuburg (1985, p.XIX) states quite incisively: "What Mayhew achieved was the fullest and most vivid picture of the experiences of labouring people in the world's greatest city in the nineteenth century. In his pages many of them speak for themselves, and we hear of their hopes, fears, customs, grievances, habits, in their own words. No other social investigator came near to him: in its scope and execution his work has no peer". This undoubtedly traces its roots to his "methodological credo", since, according to Williams (1981, p.240), Mayhew had a "grand philosopher's notion of method: choose a subject matter, and the universal method would provide procedures for acquiring, organizing, and using knowledge". Mayhew's intent was to extend the procedures of the natural sciences to social phenomena, through induction and classification. Although this was the strong suit of his work, it was also, according to Williams (1981, p.246), his weak one, as "the dual method [induction and classification] was an active disorganizing principle spreading uncertainty and interminability" (p.246).

From our point of interest, Mayhew's investigations combined the key features of the ethnographic method: lengthy interaction between researcher and subject and the researcher's daily interaction within the subject's universe.

It is worth noting that it was only in 1874 that the British Association for the Advancement of Science published *Notes and queries on anthropology* (Royal Anthropological..., 1951), which was fundamental to research in this realm of knowledge. The work defines social anthropology as the discipline that "deals with the behaviour of man in social situations". It also says that "sociological generalizations can only be formulated from the careful study of social activities and institutions among specific peoples or in definite areas of cultures" (1951, p.36). As to the way in which material is collected, it is striking how Mayhew had already adopted the book's principles even well prior to its release, as we see in this example: "For any given culture or area, material must be collected by (1) direct, and (2) indirect observation: the two methods must be continually integrated"

(p.36). *Notes* also mentions that the “questionnaire method” is of limited use and that “direct observation supplemented by immediate interrogation is the ideal course; it is most satisfactory to begin an investigation into any particular subject by way of direct observation of some event, and follow it up by questions as to details, variations, similar events , etc.” (p.36).

Bryan Green (2002) undertook a painstaking analysis of Mayhew’s ethnographic work. A sociologist at York University, Toronto, Green asserts that although Mayhew’s work is hard to categorize, the first of the three types of narratives used by ethnographers – realist, confessional, and impressionist – would apply to the London researcher. In this regard, his work “can be correlated with the supposed first moment, the ‘traditional’, in Denzin and Lincoln’s (1994) periodization of ethnographic inquiry” (Green, 2002, p.102). For Denzin and Lincoln, ethnographers like Malinowski, Mead, and others devote much time to participant observation and interviews during their fieldwork.

Although there is no detailed information on how Mayhew conducted his fieldwork, his collaborators said that he himself did the most important interviews, with his assistants taking notes. Eileen Yeo (1984, p.69, 70), commenting on research published in the *Morning Chronicle*, says that “it is not, in these latter days of sociology, surprising that Mayhew employed interviewers; what is surprising is the care with which he supervised the work, and his own personal presence in the work at every stage, with a scrupulousness which might well put some incomparably better-financed and equipped investigators of the present day to shame”.

Yeo (1984, p.71) also points out that the informants were approached in their own homes, “where they could talk most freely”; she holds that Mayhew’s approach entailed application of a standard interview: wages, working conditions, expenses, work hours, and so on. The interviewee was also prompted to compare his current work with past work and to comment on housing issues. Mayhew did not rewrite the interview in his own words; he relied on the interviewee’s own words to offer a summary “into a continuous monologue which enabled readers to see the world through the eyes of the poor and were often very revealing about language and values” (p.71). The author argues that we should not see this kind of work as “journalistic desire to create picturesque and colourful ‘characters’ for their own sake” (p.72), although some of Mayhew’s critics allege that while he practiced fine journalism, he was no social analyst, in part because as a journalist he suffered from an “under-disciplined curiosity and over-developed theatricality” (p.74).

James Bennet (1981) has undertaken what is undoubtedly the most complete analysis of Mayhew’s “oral history”. Bennet observes that he had nearly finished his book *Oral history and delinquency* when he read Anne Humpherys’ biography of Mayhew, and he emphasizes that “my contribution to the study of Mayhew is a discussion of delinquency and oral history in more detail than has been done elsewhere” (p.285, note 4). His first chapter begins with a citation from John Rosenberg (1968, p.VI): “Mayhew invented ‘oral history’ a century before the term was coined”. He points out that “later work with oral and life histories developed independent of Mayhew” and underscores the fact that while oral history had been used earlier, “Mayhew himself had no doubts that he had invented what would later be called oral history” (Bennet, 1981, p.11). Posing the question of why

Mayhew included oral histories in all of his work, Bennet answered: “1. Express his own personality and interests; 2. Communicate between social classes; 3. Educate by entertaining; 4. Demonstrate authenticity of evidence; 5. Make a vivid impression on the reader; 6. Arouse emotion, and thus rouse readers to action” (p.17). This author made the quite interesting observation that Mayhew “inserted oral history material at particular points in his writing to illustrate statements he had just made in more abstract terms and perhaps to create an aesthetic balance between human voices and the statistical data with which his tests are loaded” (p.17).

Mayhew’s originality lies not only in how he collected his interviews and retold them; his use of photography was also pioneer. *London labour and the London poor* was illustrated with woodcuts based on daguerreotypes by Richard Beard (1801-1885). Davenport (1991, p.XVI) explains that the woodcuts were necessary because at that time it was impossible to reproduce the daguerreotypes; he also points out that Mayhew and Beard were criticized for “overstating the poverty in the London slums” (p.43). Boni and Moreschi (2007) do not call Mayhew and Beard pioneers in photoethnography, citing instead as its forerunners John K. Hillers in 1870, Alice Fletcher in 1880, and Franz Boas in 1886. Humpherys (1977, p.70) is among those who feel that “Mayhew’s use of photographs as the basis of a social record even before they could be reproduced as such in print is a tribute both to his prescience about the application of modern technology to social science and to his concern for rigorous precision in his own work”. Humpherys also argues that “the woodcuts themselves represent some of the most accurate pictures that we have of the actual facial features and dress of the people making their living in the streets of London at midcentury, and are thus a valuable contribution to the social history of the period”.

Mayhew was also one of the first to use cartographic techniques, drawing up what he called “social maps” showing the distribution of crime and delinquency in London (Brown, n.d.). Some scholars have criticized these fifteen maps as revealing little, especially since they deal with crime topics uncommon in that day and age, like sexual abuse and abductions (Smith, Mar. 1985).

## **Final considerations**

In these pages, I have explored two reports by Mayhew that I deem characteristic of his work, while I have also looked at some of the literature that analyzes his work from various angles. My intention has not been to exhaust the topic but rather to examine it from the perspective of methodology. We can observe Mayhew’s originality in the pioneer way he addressed issues that have become objects of the social sciences today. His work has received growing recognition, not only because he “[gave] voice to the experiences of people who might not otherwise be heard” but because his text reveals “society [as] an objective, transsubjective presence” (Green, 2002, p.132). As Scalan (2007, p.204) has said, in the midst of an “illusion of harmony”, Mayhew showed that “the realities of poverty” were part of “society’s imperfection that was real”.

Two accounts certainly are not enough to apprehend the many forms Mayhew used to classify, describe, and interpret the people of London in the mid-nineteenth century.

Instead, I have sought to frame these examples within the literature. While Mayhew may often times have proceeded without any system, “openly chaotic” (Williams, 1981, p.238), and may have lacked a clear theoretical focus, nevertheless, when he cross-referenced census data, his own interviews, official documents, and police documents and when he created maps, portrayed the people, quite literally, and retold their narratives – walking London’s streets, flying over it in a balloon, or observing it from atop St. Paul’s cathedral – he compiled one of the most valuable sets of documentation on the city of London.<sup>11</sup>

## NOTES

\*This article presents partial results from the Projeto História da Sociologia da Saúde (History of the Sociology of Health Project), which receives CNPq funding (Bolsa Produtividade/Pesquisador IA). A first version was presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> Ibero-American Congress on Qualitative Health Research, held in Fortaleza, Ceará, on September 8-11, 2010.

<sup>1</sup> *London labour and the London poor* comprises four volumes, the last (Mayhew, Binny, 1862) written in collaboration with William Tuckniss (“The agencies at present in operation within the metropolis for the suppression of vice and crime”); Mayhew and Bracebridge Hemyng (“Prostitutes”); John Binny (“Thieves and swindlers”); and Andrew Halliday (“Beggars”). Volume IV (p.12-27) includes Mayhew’s complete classification of workers and non-workers in Great Britain. Some of the journalist’s contemporaries, like Florence Nightingale, criticized the fourth volume because it addressed the issue of prostitution (see note 5).

<sup>2</sup> The *Morning Chronicle*, which was to become a successful newspaper, began circulating in 1769 and closed its doors in 1862. Many radicals were part of it; eminent figures among them who were contemporaries of Mayhew include John Stuart Mill and Charles Dickens.

<sup>3</sup> I have chosen to use the term “report” here, although Mayhew and Binny also used other terms to characterize their oral history, such as “statements”, “experiences”, “narratives”, “street-biography”, and “histories” (Bennet, 1981, p.271).

<sup>4</sup> Humpherys (1977, p.207) cites different sources listing fifteen or ten children, but all seem to agree on the number of surviving children, which was seven.

<sup>5</sup> In 1860, Florence Nightingale wrote a letter to the editors in which she thanked them for the gift of the “extra volume” “which [she] had not yet seen”, but she declined to accept it since it dealt with a regrettable topic, that is, “regulation by Police” of prostitution. In her opinion, it had not been proven that this led to “diminution of disease from , vices (emphasis in the original).” The letter can be found in its entirety in Taithe, 1996, p.63.

<sup>6</sup> I am referring to *1851 or The adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Sandboys and family, who came up to London to enjoy themselves and to see the Great Exhibition* (Mayhew, Cruikshank, 1851), which has been analyzed in depth by Olga Maria Trabulo (2002).

<sup>7</sup> In his book, Mayhew gives the number of “street folk” as roughly 50,000, including men, women, and children. In 1851, the census indicated that about 51% of the population of England and Wales could be classified as urban.

<sup>8</sup> The first edition of *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England* was published in Germany in 1845; the first English editions came out in 1887 (U.S.) and 1891 (England).

<sup>9</sup> Harris (n.d.) wrote an interesting paper on “itinerant retailers” (i.e., street vendors or traveling salesmen) before 1900. Using examples from Mayhew, he showed that they were not without skills and that many were successful in announcing, selling, and buying; Harris pays special attention to the different ways of announcing merchandise.

<sup>10</sup> Edwin Chadwick (1800-1890) was an English reformer who studied law in London and worked to reform the Poor Laws and to address sanitary issues. He wrote *The sanitary condition of the labouring population of Great Britain* (1842), which associates poverty and insalubrity from a miasmatic perspective. In his opinion, “all smell is, if it be intense, immediate acute disease; and eventually we may say that, by depressing the system and rendering it susceptible to the action of other causes, all smell is disease” (Chadwick, cited in *Victorian London...*, n.d.).

<sup>11</sup> Mayhew tells of his balloon trip over the city in "A balloon view of London", which was the introduction to *The criminal prisons of London and scenes of prison life* (Mayhew, Binny, 1862). He states that although he had already seen "the Great Metropolis under almost every aspect" (p.8) – a reference to his visit to Jacob's Island during the cholera outbreak, to his interviews of beggars and thieves, and to his visit to the World of London" – he wanted to see it from above. One autumn afternoon, Mayhew sailed over his city in the company of the famous balloonist Charles Green (1785-1870).

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